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WHY FRESH GRADUATES STAY: FACTORS SUSTAINING CAREERS IN MALAYSIA'S FOOD SERVICE SECTOR

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Abstract:

The Malaysian food service sector relies heavily on fresh graduates to meet industry growth demands, yet high turnover rates threaten its sustainability and service quality. Retaining skilled graduates is critical, but limited research has explored why some choose to build long-term careers in the sector. This study explored the factors sustaining the careers of fresh graduates who remain in Malaysia's food service industry. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with purposively selected graduates from Malaysian public universities who had completed their bachelor's degree within the past two years and worked in the food service sector for at least six months. Data were analysed thematically using NVivo 14. Six themes emerged: personal interest, growth opportunities, work environment, psychological and mindset well-being, employee benefits, and location. The findings offer practical implications for employers to design retention strategies that integrate professional development with supportive work environments, and for educational institutions to strengthen career preparation and industry engagement. Enhancing graduate retention in the food service sector can contribute to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 on quality education and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth.

Keywords:

Food Service, Graduate Retention, Malaysian Public Universities, Career Choice, Bachelor Degree, Career Sustainability

Introduction

The hospitality industry employs a large proportion of the workforce and contributes significantly to the country's foreign exchange reserves (Thommandru et al., 2023). In Malaysia, it accounts for 6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and employs 23% of the national workforce (Kutty, 2024). The 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) focuses on improving the regulatory framework, promoting environmental sustainability, and promoting digitalisation (Unit Perancang Ekonomi, 2021). Recognised as a catalyst for economic growth and socio-economic development, the hospitality industry plays a critical role in GDP and employment in Malaysia (Thommandru et al., 2023). To sustain Malaysia's GDP, there is a high demand for hospitality graduates with the necessary skills (Mohd Shariff & Zainol Abidin, 2017).

Organisations with high levels of employee and customer engagement have prioritised human resource (HR) practices, leading both business and academia to focus on developments in human resource management (Pelit & Katircioglu, 2021). Although existing literature on hospitality and tourism outlines both extrinsic and intrinsic strategies and tactics for employee retention, further studies are needed to understand employee turnover in this labour-intensive industry (Abdelazim, 2023). Effective human resource management has a significant impact on corporate image, highlighting the importance of hiring effectively and meeting employee expectations (Mahapatro, 2021). Given the industry's reliance on a steady pipeline of qualified talent, universities and colleges play a crucial role in preparing students for the competitive labour market (Kocsis & Pusztai, 2025). In line with global trends, improving graduates' employability is a key priority in Malaysian higher education. The Ministry of Higher Education has established the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2015 to 2025, targeting an employment rate above 80% by 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Higher education institutions are therefore essential in preparing a skilled workforce for the future tourism and hospitality sectors (Gomes et al., 2023).

According to the Institute of Labour Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA), the accommodation and food service sector recorded the highest average turnover rate of 40% in the third quarter of 2023 compared to the third quarter of 2022 (ILMIA, 2023). Similarly, the Malaysian Association of Hotels (2023) reported that despite improved salaries and benefits, the industry still faces a 20% labour shortage. In addition, the Aon Hewitt Malaysia 2015 Hotels and Hospitality Industry Survey found that the attrition rate for hotel and hospitality support staff was 18%, double the national average at that time (Ng, 2016). Department of Statistic Malaysia (2023) reported that food and beverage services remain limited in skilled workers, even though the sector is highly customer-centric and requires a wide range of skills and human interaction. As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of persons engaged in food and beverage services between 2015 and 2022 shows that the sector remains heavily dependent on semi-skilled workers, highlighting the persistent gap in skilled talent that is crucial for sustaining service quality.

High turnover rates, persistent labour shortages, and underutilisation of talent present ongoing challenges to the sustainability of Malaysia's hospitality sector, particularly in the food service segment. While the industry offers diverse career opportunities, retaining fresh graduates has become increasingly difficult due to factors such as long working hours, limited career progression, and misalignment between graduates' expectations and workplace realities. This study focuses on fresh graduates from Malaysian public universities who have chosen to remain in the food service industry, exploring the factors that sustain their careers through a qualitative,

phenomenological approach. By understanding the motivations and conditions that encourage graduates to build long-term careers in this sector, the study contributes to the development of targeted retention strategies for employers and to curriculum and career preparation improvements in higher education. These insights are expected to support both industry and academia in addressing talent shortages and in promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 on quality education and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth.

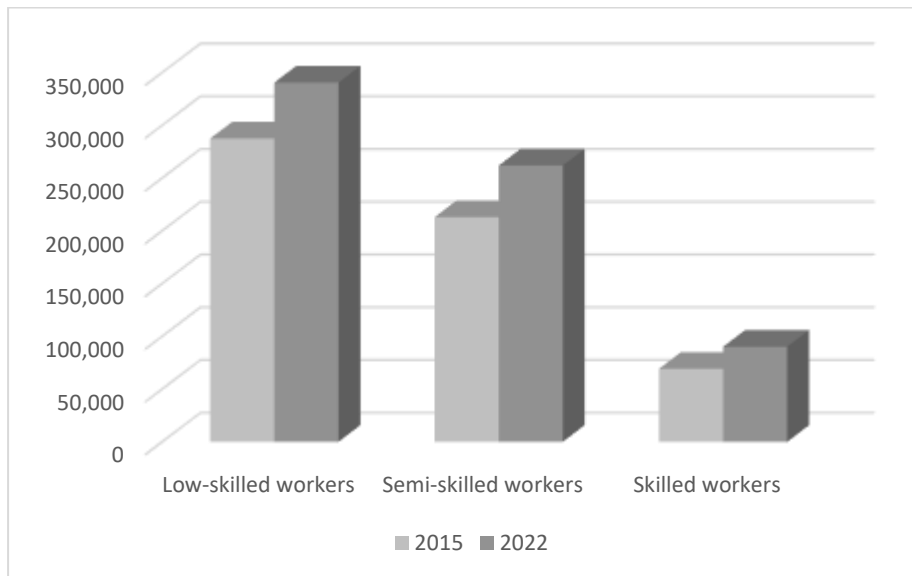


Figure 1: Number Of Persons Engaged for Food and Beverages Services by Category of Skill Between 2015 And 2022 (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2023)

Literature Review

In the context of the hospitality industry, several studies have focused on understanding the determinants of career choice. These studies have shown the importance of exploring career choice factors to understand the motivations, preferences, and challenges that individuals face when pursuing a career in the hospitality industry. The importance of understanding the career choices of hospitality graduates has received considerable attention in higher education due to the emphasis on employability (Ghani et al, 2025). Liu et al. (2022) argue that a better understanding of the factors that influence the career choices of hospitality students is necessary to adequately prepare them for the global economy. However, the factors influencing graduates' career choices are complex and characterised by unpredictability and instability (Tsai et al., 2024). Therefore, further research is needed to explore these factors in more detail. Previous research has identified several factors that influence an individual's decision to join, leave, or choose not to join the hospitality industry. Factors influencing the decision to enter the industry include perceived career opportunities, growth prospects, job security, industry reputation, and personal interest (Anthony et al., 2021). In contrast, factors that lead to turnover and leaving the industry include job dissatisfaction, long working hours, limited opportunities for advancement, low salaries, and work-life balance issues (Croes et al., 2024).

In addition, some people choose not to work in the hospitality industry due to negative experiences during internships, a lack of interest, or alternative career preferences (Hwang et al., 2024). An important factor influencing graduates' decision to enter the hospitality industry is their perception of career opportunities in the sector (Tsai et al., 2024). Gyepi-Garbrah et al. (2023) highlight the lack of empirical evidence on how career choice decisions are made by

hospitality students and identify a research gap in understanding the actual decision-making process. Therefore, investigating the factors that influence graduates' perceptions of career opportunities is critical for refining education, training, and labour market strategies in the industry. Job satisfaction has been identified as a critical factor in employee retention and turnover in the hospitality industry (Tsai et al., 2024). Understanding the specific factors that contribute to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction among hospitality graduates is essential for gaining insight into their decision-making process and identify opportunities for improvement in the industry.

Career Choices in Hospitality Industry

Choosing a career in the hospitality industry offers fresh graduates a range of opportunities and challenges. This industry serves various sectors, including hotel management and event planning, and offers different career paths. This diversity allows fresh graduates to explore employment opportunities ranging from frontline jobs to management positions. In addition, the global nature of this industry provides opportunities for those who enjoy cultural exploration. Employment in the hospitality industry encourages the development of skills such as problem-solving, communication, customer service, and time management (Mesa, 2023; Nikadimovs & Ivanchenko, 2020). However, despite the attractiveness of numerous prospects, the hospitality industry also presents several obstacles. The fast-paced and dynamic nature of the profession may be exciting for some, but it can also present significant challenges due to the demand of the industry. Cho and Choi (2021) found that hospitality career paths are predominantly customer-centric, with a focus on customer satisfaction and service excellence. This customer-centric approach may be effective, but it also requires the professional handling of demanding customers and the ability to communicate under difficult circumstances. Despite these limitations, the industry offers opportunities for advancement and success to dedicated employees who wish to develop their careers. Ultimately, people who are comfortable in dynamic environments, who care about customer satisfaction, and who are willing to adapt to the unique demands of the industry will be attracted to a career in hospitality.

Challenges of Career Choices in Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry faces major challenges related to high turnover rates, underutilisation of talent, and employee dissatisfaction. These problems lead to a waste of valuable human resources and hinder the growth and development of the industry (Ghani et al., 2022). In addition, many hospitality graduates choose not to pursue a career in the industry, and those who do often face practical challenges and negative experiences during internship (Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2021). Existing theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding career choice factors, but there is a need to fill the gap by exploring each career choice situation (entering, leaving, or not choosing) in the context of the hospitality industry. Addressing this gap is particularly important to inform strategies that can reduce turnover and improve graduate retention. Recent findings by Tsai et al. (2024) highlight that personality traits, self-efficacy, and creativity significantly influence employability among hospitality and tourism students, suggesting that individual attributes play a crucial role in shaping graduates' perceptions of career opportunities and their potential satisfaction within the industry. Alongside these personal factors, lifestyle considerations such as work-life balance have become increasingly important when graduates evaluate potential career options (Jusoh et al., 2011). Given the labour-intensive nature of the hospitality industry, graduates' perceptions of work-life balance can significantly influence their decision not to work in this industry. Exploring these perceptions and understanding their impact on career choice can

provide valuable insights to employers and policymakers in developing strategies to attract and retain talent in the hospitality industry (Ghani et. al., 2022).

Application of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent, Brown and Hackett, emphasizes that career development is shaped by the interplay of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals, all influenced by environmental and contextual factors (Brown & Lent, 2019; Rezky & Rasto, 2024; Sheu & Phrasavath, 2018; Zola et al., 2022). In the context of food service careers, graduates' self-efficacy which refers to their confidence in their ability to succeed, can be undermined by negative experiences such as burnout, inadequate practical training, and unrealistic job expectations, which erode their belief in adapting to demanding work environments (Brown & Lent, 2019; Lindley, 2005; Rezky & Rasto, 2024; Sheu & Phrasavath, 2018). When outcome expectations regarding salary, job security, career progression, and work-life balance are mismatched, reducing motivation to remain in the industry can decline. Personal goals, such as financial stability and professional growth, may conflict with the realities of food service work, leading to career withdrawal when self-efficacy declines and negative outcome expectations rise (Karatepe et al., 2023). SCCT provides a framework for understanding how these factors interact, explaining why graduates may logically choose to leave or redirect their career paths when support, reinforcement, and belief in success are lacking. This theory has been widely validated across diverse populations and is recognized for its utility in designing interventions to support career development and persistence (Brown & Lent, 2019; Damodar et al., 2024; Rezky & Rasto, 2024).

Person-Environment Fit Theory & Holland's RIASEC Model

Person-Environment Fit Theory proposes that career satisfaction, performance, and stability are maximized when there is a close match between an individual's characteristics and the demands or rewards of their work environment (Bretz & Judge, 1994). Holland's RIASEC model builds on this idea by classifying both people and work environments into six types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. This model predicts that greater congruence between a person's type and their work setting leads to higher job satisfaction and career stability (Holland, 1997; Nauta, 2010). When there is a mismatch between an individual's RIASEC personality type and the characteristics of their work environment, such as Artistic and Social types lacking creativity or social engagement, or Investigative and Conventional types facing unpredictability and chaos, job satisfaction decreases, stress increases, and career disengagement can occur. Although congruent employees tend to be more satisfied with aspects including pay, promotions, and supervision, the predictive power of RIASEC fit is sometimes limited compared to more nuanced measures of basic interests. In food service careers, the fast-paced and operationally diverse nature of the work often results in inconsistent or broad activity opportunities that lower congruence and accommodate a greater diversity of interests, which can limit the strength of the fit. This highlights the importance of achieving person-environment congruence for positive career outcomes, while also recognising that actual work settings may require more refined and individualised approaches to supporting career satisfaction and retention (Rocconi et al., 2020).

Expectancy-Value Theory

These studies suggest that Expectancy-Value Theory explains career choices and motivation by showing that individuals are more likely to pursue and remain in careers where they expect to succeed and perceive high value, while low expectations for success and high perceived

costs such as job instability, low prestige, limited advancement, and emotional or physical demands reduce motivation and increase the likelihood of leaving, with these factors being shaped by personal beliefs, social influences, and cultural context. The integration of expectancies and values can be additive or multiplicative depending on the context, and these beliefs and values develop over time, influencing both initial career aspirations and long-term engagement. When mismatches arise between expectations, values, and actual job experiences, disengagement and career shifts often occur (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). In the Malaysian food service sector, this theory helps explain why fresh graduates may choose to remain when they perceive clear opportunities for success and value in their roles, and conversely, why misaligned expectations and high perceived costs can lead to early career exits.

Research Methodology

The proposed research methodology for this study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of fresh graduates in the hospitality, food service, and hotel management fields. Face-to-face interviews were conducted as the primary method of data collection, providing in-depth insights and a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence fresh graduates' career choices in the hospitality industry. A qualitative approach was used to capture the richness and complexity of participants' experiences. This approach is associated with a qualitative research design to provide a detailed description and analysis of the quality or substance of the human experience (Marvasti, 2004). According to Merriam (2009, p. 13), qualitative research allows us to understand “the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.” It also supports the “explorations of meanings, perceptions and understandings”, as proposed by Horn (2012, p. 119). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted to better understand the perspectives on the thematic factors in hospitality graduates' career decisions. The semi-structured interview questions were guided by the literature review to ensure relevance to the topic, but the interviews were conducted inductively in alignment with the purpose statement, allowing participants' perspectives to shape the direction and depth of the discussion.

Sample Selection

This study, aiming to understand a phenomenon through participants' perspectives, required the recruitment of individuals best positioned to offer in-depth and relevant insight. To achieve this, purposive sampling was implemented, selecting individuals align with the purpose statement, in line with the methodology outlined by Taherdoost (2016). Specifically, the target group comprised fresh graduates from Malaysian public universities who had graduated within the past two years with a bachelor's degree in food service management from (1) Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), (2) UiTM Terengganu, (3) UiTM Shah Alam, (4) Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), and (5) Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). Furthermore, participants were required to be currently employed in the food service industry, either in operations or management, holding roles at least at the supervisory level in operations or executive level in management.

Table 1: List Of Public Universities That Offers Food Service Bachelor Degree Program

No	List Of Public Universities	
1.	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	Bachelor of Science (Food Service Management)
2.	Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Puncak Alam	Bachelor of Science (Food Service Management)
	Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Terengganu	Bachelor of Science (Food Service Management)
3.	Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	Bachelor of Food Science (Food Service)
4.	Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)	Bachelor of Food Science (Food Service and Nutrition)

To ensure a diverse and comprehensive sample, this study employed snowball sampling, a method where initial participants refer others who meet the study's criteria. This approach is particularly effective when traditional sampling methods may not reach all potential participants. In this study, the process began with graduates from specific public universities who were currently employed in the food service industry. These initial participants were encouraged to refer peers who also meet the criteria, with the peers' prior consent, thereby expanding the participant pool.

Ethical considerations were important in this process. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and were asked to share this information with potential referrals, rather than personal contact details. This ensures that all referrals are made with the explicit consent of the individuals involved. Additionally, to protect privacy, no incentives are offered for referrals, and all personal information was kept confidential. This study was reviewed and approved by the Universiti Putra Malaysia Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Participants (JKEUPM), ensuring that all recruitment and data collection procedures complied with established ethical standards.

Data Collection

The data collection process began with contacting the academic affairs offices of selected public universities, explaining the study's aim and seeking their approval before requesting assistance in connecting with recent food service graduates. This process required a further update and follow-up with the universities to ensure the fresh graduates obtained the information. After receiving the contact information, a Google Form was distributed to collect profiling details such as position held, length of service, and company information for the purpose of screening eligibility. The screening eligibility process takes longer time than expected due to the criteria standards. Some participants do not meet the standard and some of them withdraw as time constraint to conduct face-to-face interviews. Eligible participants were invited to engage in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were designed to balance structure and flexibility, allowing participants to share their unique journeys in their own words.

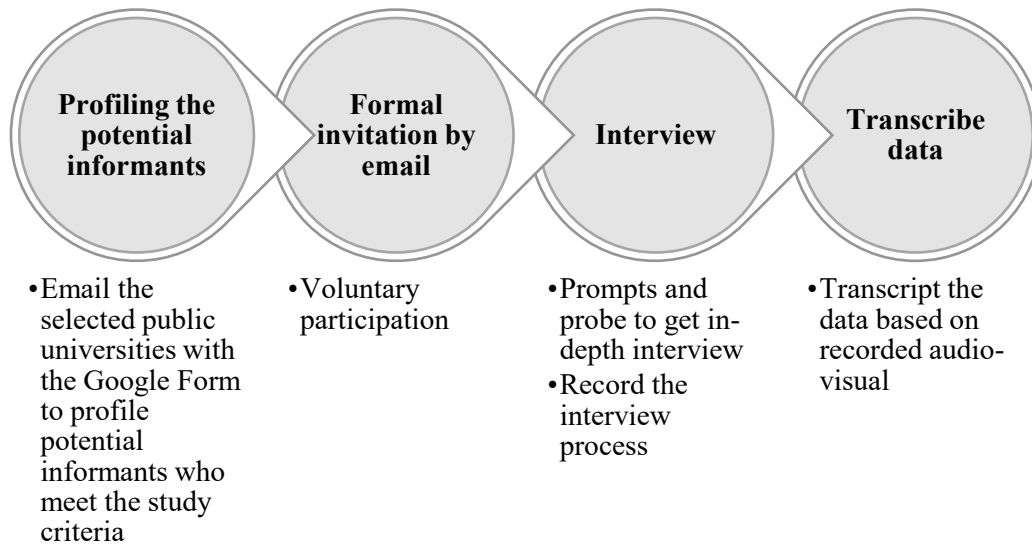


Figure 2: Process Of Data Collection for the Study

At the conclusion of each interview, the study also employed snowball sampling to broaden the participant pool, whereby initial informants shared the contact details of peers who also met the study criteria, with the peers' prior consent. This method helps reach a wider range of perspectives while information remained confidential. Participants were offered an honorarium as a token of appreciation for their time and their contribution.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data in this study. This approach involves identifying themes and exploring the meaning of the data in relation to the research questions. NVivo 14 was used as a tool for analysing the data. The analysis began with familiarisation with the data by reading and transcribing all findings from the interviews. The data were identified and compared with each other to look for recurring regularities in the data. Open coding and analytical coding were applied during the categorisation phase. Clusters and themes were then developed and named based on the results and the literature review. With reference to previous studies and expert opinions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the clusters were examined and categorised into factor themes in relation to the research questions of this study.

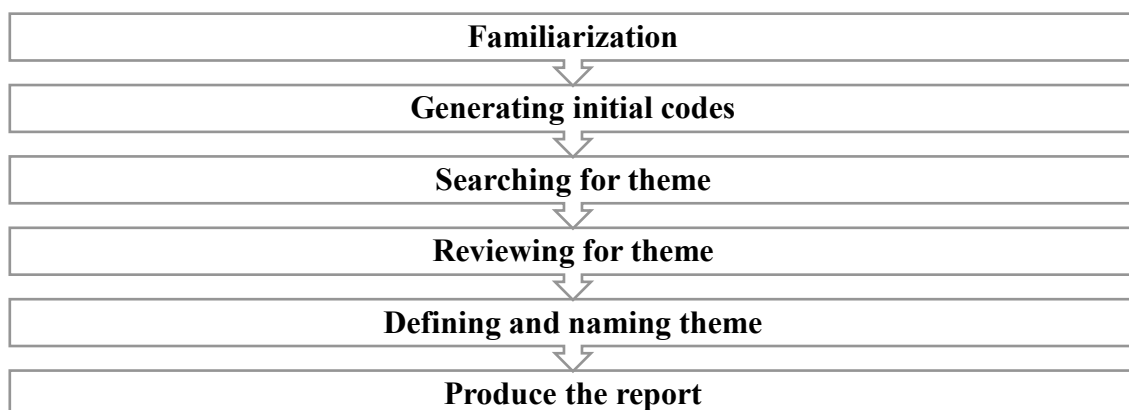


Figure 3: Steps Of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence fresh graduates to remain in Malaysia's food service industry. Analysis of participants' insights revealed six themes: (1) personal interest, (2) growth opportunities, (3) positive and supportive work environment, (4) psychological and mindset well-being, (5) employee benefits, and (6) location. These themes reflect the interconnection between internal motivations and external environmental influences, aligning with the theoretical frameworks of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), Person-Environment Fit Theory (Holland's RIASEC model), and the Expectancy-Value Theory. Together, these frameworks suggest that sustained career choice is shaped by the alignment of individual aspirations with the conditions and outcomes of the work environment.

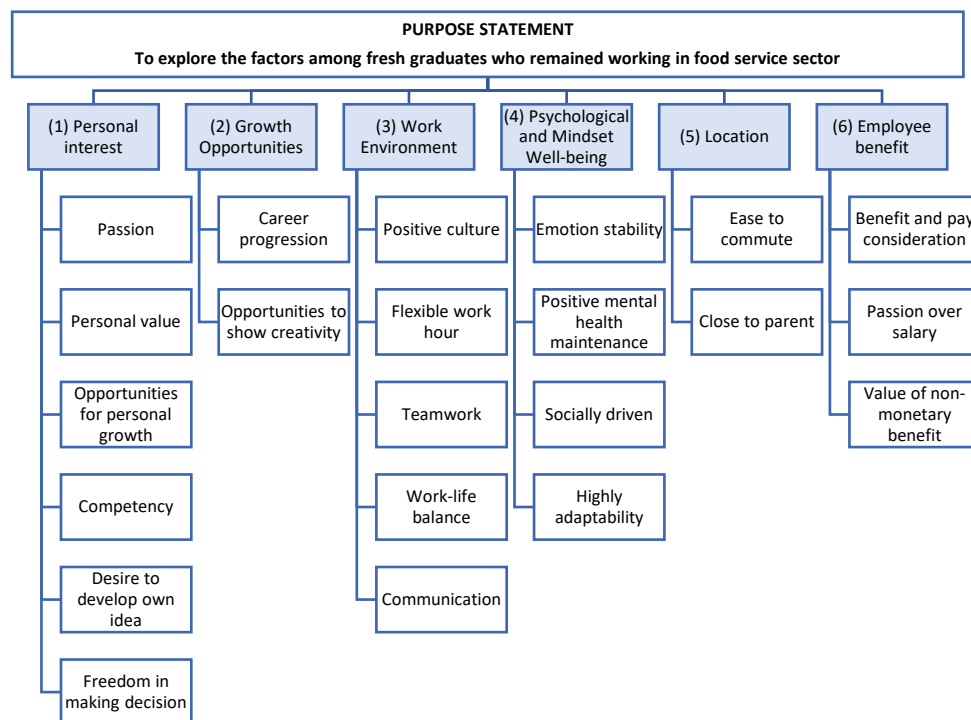


Figure 4: Themes Derived from Participants' Insights

The most dominant theme among participants was (1) personal interest, reflecting the components of passion, skill development, competencies, and creativity for the food service industry. Many viewed their roles as aligned with personal goals and values, such as one graduate who shared, *"I am really passionate about growing in this industry as I want to start a food business one day..."* (Participant 2). This alignment supports Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes self-efficacy and goal orientation (Chuang et al., 2020), as well as the Person-Environment Fit Theory, which links job satisfaction to value congruence (Kou & Rasdi, 2025). Participants also valued growth, autonomy, and skill development, with one mentioning, *"I don't want to be stuck doing the same thing forever — I want learn and grow in my job..."* (Participant 4). Others highlighted confidence in their competencies and desire for continuous improvement: *"I know I can perform because I have the ability to do..."* (Participant 5) and *"Every day I think I improve my ability and skill like the way I think when solving problems."* (Participant 1). Creativity and decision-making freedom also mattered, as one participant noted, *"I love to share my ideas with my supervisor, like new menus or some SOPs..."* (Participant 3).

Another key motivator for fresh graduates remaining in the food service industry was the presence of (2) growth opportunities, including career progression, creative expression, and self-development. One participant shared, “...my company offer quite good progression for me to move forward...” (Participant 4), underscoring the importance of visible progression paths. Others highlighted opportunities to innovate, such as, “This industry allows me to play around with my creativity, my company also give me the chance to develop new product...” (Participant 3). This creative autonomy not only boosted job satisfaction but also fostered a deeper sense of ownership and purpose. The drive for continuous improvement was also clearly visible: “I always want to upgrade and don’t want to stay in one position for too long...” (Participant 5). These findings align with the Expectancy-Value Theory, which suggests that individuals are more motivated to persist in roles that offer perceived value and future rewards. Supporting literature (Liu et al., 2023) further confirms that when employees recognize opportunities for growth, their retention improves and turnover intention declines.

The third theme that influence fresh graduates to remain in Malaysia’s food service industry is (3) positive and supportive work environment. This theme consists of the components of teamwork, communication, work-life balance, and managerial flexibility. One participant shared, “We always work as a team and cover each other, especially during peak hour” (Participant 2), reflecting a collaborative culture that eases stress during busy times. Another noted, “Communication is important because we need to deliver tasks and instructions” (Participant 5), highlighting how clear dialogue supports operational efficiency. Work-life balance also contributed to satisfaction: “The shift schedule quite okay, and I can still enjoy my time with friend and family” (Participant 1). Similarly, flexible management practices were appreciated, as one graduate explained, “Sometimes I can request an off day if I have something important or emergency” (Participant 4). These experiences support findings that organizational culture and interpersonal dynamics significantly impact retention (Rani, 2025). According to Person-Environment Fit Theory, when graduates feel aligned with their workplace’s social and structural environment, they experience greater satisfaction and commitment. In contrast, environments lacking support, communication, or flexibility tend to increase dissatisfaction and turnover (Andela & Van Der Doef, 2017). Therefore, cultivating a culture that values communication, peer support, and adaptable practices is essential for retaining young talent in the food service sector.

Closely connected to the work environment, (4) psychological and mindset well-being emerged as a crucial theme in career sustainability for fresh graduates. Participants acknowledged the emotional well-being of food service work and emphasized the need for resilience, adaptability, and a positive mindset. As one shared, “I need to be strong and calm even when everything seems so hard or rush” (Participant 4), highlighting the role of emotional. Another noted, “Every day I need to tell myself to think positive, because if I stress, I cannot do my job well” (Participant 5), linking mental health directly to performance. Social adaptability also surfaced as vital: “I enjoy meeting new people and being part of the team... I’m a social person, so this job suits me” (Participant 3). Similarly, flexibility was seen as essential: “You cannot always expect things to go smooth in this job, so I learn to adjust myself” (Participant 2). These reflections underscore the emotional maturity required to thrive in high-pressure roles. Supporting research (Song et al., 2021) highlights how emotional labour and burnout drive turnover, while SCCT suggests that stress and low efficacy reduce career persistence. To counter this, organizations should provide mental health support, emotional intelligence

training, and psychological safety, as recommended by Nakra & Kashyap (2023) and Park et al. (2025), to enhance both employee well-being and retention.

The next theme is (5) employee benefits, that played a significant role in shaping long-term career decisions among graduates. Many were willing to accept lower initial pay in exchange for experience and skill-building, as one participant explained: *"I know food service did not offer much salary, but I need the experience and skill for my future business setup"* (Participant 1). Non-monetary benefits such as free food and shift meals were appreciated, *"The free meals during shifts really help me to save for lunch and dinner"* (Participant 5) and some expressed a strong intrinsic drive, prioritizing passion over immediate financial gain: *"I love what I do now and keeps going, the money will follow me"* (Participant 3). These insights support the Expectancy-Value Theory, which posits that individuals remain committed when they perceive substantial overall value in their roles (Lim, 2021; Pei et al., 2025). However, prolonged exposure to low wages, long working hours, and job insecurity may erode motivation if these challenges are not offset by meaningful benefits or psychological rewards (Fitri, 2024; Santos, 2025).

Though less dominant than other themes, (6) location still influenced graduates' career decisions by offering practical advantages. Working close to home reduced transportation costs, eased commuting stress, and improved work-life balance. As one participant shared, *"It's near my house, so I don't have to spend so much on transport, and I can go back quickly if needed"* (Participant 2). Another valued being near family: *"Working close to home lets me help my parents and be around when they need me"* (Participant 1). These advantages align with research indicating that shorter commutes are linked to higher job satisfaction and better overall well-being (Guo & Ayoun, 2021; Liu et al., 2020). In this study, location acted as an enabling factor that complemented other career motivations by reducing daily stress and providing emotional stability during the transition into full-time employment.

Conclusion

This study shows that the decision of fresh graduates to remain in Malaysia's food service industry is shaped by a dynamic combination of passion, personal values, and workplace conditions. Six main themes emerged from the analysis: personal interest, growth opportunities, work environment, psychological and mindset well-being, employee benefits, and location. These factors do not act in isolation but interact in ways that strengthen career commitment. For instance, a strong personal interest is sustained when graduates experience a supportive culture, clear pathways for growth, and meaningful benefits that match their life priorities. The findings, viewed through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory, Person Environment Fit Theory, and Expectancy Value Theory, provide deeper insight into the psychological and situational influences that shape early career choices in the sector.

The implications of this study are important for employers, educators, and policymakers. Employers can design retention strategies that focus not only on competitive pay but also on building supportive work environments, offering clear opportunities for progression, and ensuring psychological safety. Educators and policymakers can use these findings to align training programmes with industry realities, equipping graduates with resilience, adaptability, and the skills required to thrive in the food service industry. By bridging the gap between graduate expectations and workplace realities, the sector can reduce turnover, strengthen its talent pipeline, and position itself as a sustainable and rewarding career option.

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample included only fresh graduates from public universities, which may not represent the experiences of the wider food service workforce. Future studies should include graduates from private institutions, vocational training backgrounds, and various regions in Malaysia to gain a broader understanding. Long-term studies would also help track how motivations and retention factors change over time. Expanding the scope in this way would allow for more inclusive and evidence-based strategies to strengthen workforce sustainability in Malaysia's food service sector.

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