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BEYOND SALARY: A GENERATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY ON JOB CONTENTMENT AND RETENTION AMONG CULINARY PROFESSIONALS IN MALAYSIA

Mohd Syafiq Othman¹, Nik Mohd Shahril Nik Mohd Nor², Mohd Salehuddin Mohd Zahari³,
Zul Hazam Mohd Piah^{4*}

¹ Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

 syafiqo@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6307-9188>

² Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

 nik.shahril@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6748-5776>

³ UCSI Universiti Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

 salehuddinn@ucsiuniversity.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0231-173X>

⁴ Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia

 zulhazam@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8019-3350>

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Employee retention remains a persistent challenge in the Malaysian hospitality industry, particularly among culinary professionals working in demanding kitchen environments. Existing chef-retention research has largely emphasised monetary and non-monetary rewards and job satisfaction, leaving limited understanding of the deeper psychological mechanisms through which broader motivational resources translate into employees' willingness to remain. In addition, culinary professionals are often treated as a relatively homogeneous workforce, providing limited insight into whether motivational-retention relationships operate similarly across generational cohorts. This conceptual paper therefore proposes a framework linking motivational attributes, job contentment and job retention among culinary professionals in Malaysia. Motivational attributes are conceptualised through empowerment, psychological resources and a supportive work environment, which are proposed to strengthen job contentment and, subsequently, job retention. Generational cohort is positioned as a grouping variable for multi-group comparison rather than as an additional causal construct in the model. The framework is anchored in the Job Demands-Resources Model, Self-Determination Theory and Social Exchange Theory. Its novelty lies in integrating motivational resources, deeper work contentment and generational heterogeneity

within a culinary-specific retention framework. Practically, the framework may help hotel managers develop evidence-based, targeted retention strategies that respond to different workforce needs without assuming that one retention approach is equally effective for all culinary professionals.

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Culinary Professionals; Job Contentment; Job Retention; Motivational Attributes; Multi-Group Analysis; Generational Cohort; Hospitality Industry; Malaysia



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Introduction

The hospitality industry is a key service industry in Malaysia because it promotes tourism, creates jobs, stimulates economic development, and improves competitiveness. In this context, hotels are key players because they facilitate domestic and international tourism by offering guests appropriate accommodation, catering services, event venues, and personalised experiences. The success of hotel operations depends on the skills and stability of the staff employed in a particular establishment. Among many types of hotel workers, culinary professionals play an important role in hotel operations because of the tasks that they are responsible for.

Culinary professionals such as commis chefs, Demi Chef de Partie, Chef de Partie, Sous Chefs and Executive Chefs make a great contribution to the success of a hotel operation. To succeed in this work, professionals need to be skilled, creative, disciplined, a team player, and able to cope with stress. Although they are mostly invisible to customers, the products culinary professionals create affect customer satisfaction and a hotel's performance. A hotel can spend a lot of money on facilities, marketing, and branding, but kitchen performance can still influence how the hotel is perceived.

Nevertheless, the hotel sector is still experiencing employee retention problems. Cooking is stereotypically perceived as involving long working hours, shift work, strenuous physical work, heat exposure, production pressure, time pressure, insufficient rest times and a hierarchical organisational structure of kitchens. Such working conditions may result in stress, burnout, dissatisfaction and turnover intention among culinary workers. The negative impact of turnover has been described earlier in hospitality management literature, with disruption in operations, recruitment expenses, training expenses, productivity loss, and inconsistent

services identified as the main consequences (Chuang et al., 2008; Han, 2022; Mekoth et al., 2023). In a professional kitchen, turnover can also disrupt teamwork, mentoring, and the transfer of culinary skills.

Traditionally, retention efforts in the culinary and hospitality industries have been predominantly financial. Salary, bonuses, allowances, promotions, and job security have been recognised as some of the most important mechanisms of motivation and retention. Past research on chef retention has covered monetary and non-monetary rewards, job satisfaction, and job retention, revealing that rewards are important in studying chefs' intentions to stay in the organisation (Berberian, 2008; Kuean et al., 2010; Shinnar, 1996). Nevertheless, this approach can be limited because it does not fully account for retention, especially after employees gain more experience and expertise and become more professionally mobile.

The evolving nature of the workforce reinforces the need to reconsider culinary retention. New findings from hospitality research claim that younger employees, especially Generation Z, as well as all other digitally native groups, tend to be more flexible, open to technology and integration of the latter into their work processes, to continuous feedback, career development, innovations, and work-life balance (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2025; Seyfi, 2024; Susanto et al., 2025). Nevertheless, these preferences should not be regarded as generational characteristics automatically applicable to all individuals within particular cohorts. Experienced and senior culinary professionals may view the importance of recognition, professional prestige, job stability, and career sustainability differently. The key question is not whether differences exist between generations, but whether the relationships between motivational characteristics, job contentment, and retention differ across generations.

This paper offers a theoretical framework named *Beyond Salary: A Generational Comparative Study on Job Contentment and Retention among Culinary Professionals in Malaysia*. The expression "beyond salary" highlights that while financial compensation is necessary for any employee, it does not fully explain the process of retention. The proposed framework addresses additional motivational sources and deeper psychological processes, namely job contentment, which may explain why culinary professionals choose to stay in their jobs. Job contentment can be considered as a stable feeling of satisfaction, professional pride and harmony with one's work role.

This conceptual paper expands the discourse on chef retention by considering motivation characteristics, job satisfaction, and job retention within a single explanatory chain, using generational cohort as a comparative criterion. The proposed model draws on three interconnected theories: the Job Demands-Resources Model, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. These theories help explain how organisational resources can support people working in challenging kitchen environments, how these resources can gain psychological significance, and how positive organisational treatment can be reciprocated with an intention to stay.

Problem Statement

Employee turnover remains one of the most significant HR challenges in hospitality, as it affects productivity, consistency, team spirit, and service quality. The impact may be especially disturbing in professional kitchens, as chefs possess specific skills, experience, and organisational know-how related to the kitchen, its procedures, and its menu. Replacing chefs

requires time and money, as well as a long adaptation period for newcomers to learn kitchen norms and culture. Therefore, retaining employees becomes both an administrative problem and a strategy for ensuring the sustainability of hotel operations.

Existing research has identified monetary and non-monetary rewards and job satisfaction as key determinants of chef and hospitality employee retention. Pay, bonuses, allowances, recognition, career opportunities, flexible working schedules, and supportive supervision continue to play an important role, as employees need fair remuneration and favourable working conditions (Milman, 2002; Shinnar, 1996). At the same time, previous research indicates that salary and job stability alone may not sufficiently explain employee retention when employees seek personal development, professional recognition, and a sense of self-meaning (Pratten, 2003). There appears to be a gap in the explanation: although the existing literature identifies several retention factors, it does not thoroughly consider the motivational processes behind them.

The next research gap relates to the overwhelming predominance of job satisfaction in explaining retention from a psychological perspective. Job satisfaction can be used to assess job conditions like salary, supervision, workload, and opportunities for promotion, but such assessments can be situational and specific to particular conditions. Culinary workers might be attached not only because of their satisfaction with job conditions, but also because of professional satisfaction, identification with their job roles, and finding meaning in what they do. In this paper, we introduce the concept of job contentment, which encompasses these aspects of work. We do not seek to replace job satisfaction with job contentment as the main concept used in assessing retention. Instead, we try to explore a deeper psychological factor that explains retention in a job.

Another research gap relates to workforce heterogeneity. Culinary professionals have traditionally been viewed as a homogeneous occupational category, and little attention has been given to whether the same motivation works equally well for young and senior workers. Recent hospitality literature suggests generation-related differences in younger workers' expectations around flexibility, feedback, career development, and work-life balance (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2025; Seyfi, 2024; Susanto et al., 2025). These assumptions must be tested, and it remains unclear whether the structural connections between motivation, job contentment, and job retention differ across generations.

Taken together, three limitations remain in the current literature: first, a lack of elaboration on how motivational resources can lead to retention; second, a lack of emphasis on job satisfaction as a psychological mediator; and third, a lack of evidence on whether the suggested relationships vary by generation. In view of the above limitations, the following study posits that motivational factors affect job satisfaction, and job satisfaction affects job retention. The variable "generational cohort" is used as a categorising factor to compare the strength of the suggested relationships between junior and senior chefs.

Literature Review

Culinary Professionals and Retention in the Hotel Industry

Culinary professionals are a specialised kind of hospitality personnel that includes food preparers, producers, presenters, menu execution, and kitchen managers. In the hotel industry, the performance of these personnel is directly related to service quality, customer satisfaction

and brand reputation. Effective kitchen operations require skills and the ability to coordinate and communicate with others. The performance of culinary employees can influence the quality of dining, banquet service, room service, buffet production, etc.

Furthermore, chefs are famous for their hard work. They often work on weekends, holidays, in the evening and during busy periods of business. The kitchen environment is difficult because it is hot and noisy; employees have to stand for long periods, move around the workplace, and use kitchen equipment. At the same time, culinary work also requires emotional and mental discipline because chefs must produce high-quality food quickly. Such working conditions can lead to stress and turnover intention among culinary personnel (Heimerl et al., 2020; Khan & Sreenivasan, 2024; Rinsdale, 2019).

Retaining culinary professionals is important because experienced chefs are difficult to replace. This is because chefs' experience and knowledge develop through training, practice, repetition, and work experience. Professional chefs know menu standards, ingredient properties, kitchen timing, staff capabilities, etc. Therefore, retaining culinary professionals is not only an administrative matter but also an important strategic issue.

Monetary and Non-Monetary Rewards

Reward systems have long been used to motivate and retain employees. Monetary rewards refer to financial returns such as salary, bonuses, overtime pay, allowances and other financial benefits. These rewards matter because they provide economic security and offer tangible recognition of employees' contributions. In demanding industries such as hospitality, fair financial compensation is necessary to reduce dissatisfaction and support basic employee well-being.

However, monetary rewards may not be sufficient to retain culinary professionals in the long term. Earlier research suggested that the importance of monetary rewards may decline when employees become more skilled and experienced (Applebaum & Kamal, 2000; Berberian, 2008). Highly skilled chefs may seek not only higher pay, but also better work environments, recognition, autonomy and professional growth. If a workplace offers a good salary but poor leadership, excessive workload or limited respect, employees may still choose to leave.

Non-monetary rewards include recognition, appreciation, training opportunities, promotion, career development, flexible schedules, supportive supervision and a positive work climate. These rewards may be especially relevant in the culinary profession because chefs often value recognition of skill, trust from superiors and opportunities to develop professionally. Non-monetary rewards may create emotional attachment and increase employees' sense of belonging. However, non-monetary rewards must be meaningful and aligned with employees' expectations. Generic rewards may not be effective if they do not address actual workplace stressors or career needs.

This paper does not argue that salary is unimportant. Rather, salary should be understood as one part of a broader retention framework. A "beyond salary" perspective recognises that culinary professionals stay not only because they are paid, but because they feel respected, empowered, supported and fulfilled in their work.

Motivational Attributes

Under this approach, motivational attributes are defined as a higher-order construct that includes three components: empowerment, psychological resources, and a supportive work environment. Specifically, empowerment encompasses autonomy and decision-making power; psychological resources denote perceived capabilities, confidence and psychological well-being of the employees; while the supportive work environment encompasses organisational, interpersonal and environmental conditions needed for the productive performance of the job. These definitions establish clear boundaries for the proposed theoretical framework.

Empowerment means that employees are provided with autonomy, decision-making power and control over their jobs. In professional kitchens, empowerment may include giving chefs the freedom to voice their opinions, participate in menu development, solve problems, guide young workers, and exercise their professional judgement. Empowered employees may feel trusted and respected, which can increase their sense of ownership and commitment (Alshemmari, 2023; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empowering young chefs is crucial because they expect to voice their opinions and contribute to innovation.

Psychological resources are defined as inner abilities of employees that help them cope with work demands. Psychological resources include self-efficacy, confidence, emotional well-being, optimism and professional identity. The more psychologically resourceful culinary professionals are, the better they can cope with work stress and maintain positive attitudes despite fatigue, conflict, and criticism. This category of factors will be regarded in this paper as a whole set of psychological resources.

A supportive work environment refers to the physical, social, and organisational conditions that shape employees' daily work experience. In the culinary context, relevant conditions include kitchen safety, equipment and staffing availability, workload distribution, leadership support, teamwork, communication, fairness, and organisational culture. A supportive environment can reduce unnecessary strain and strengthen employees' sense of being valued. In contrast, a toxic or poorly resourced kitchen may weaken contentment and increase intention to leave even when financial compensation is acceptable.

Together, empowerment, psychological resources and supportive work environment represent a holistic set of motivational attributes. These dimensions extend retention explanation beyond external rewards by focusing on the quality of employees' work experience, their personal capacity to function effectively and the organisational conditions that support meaningful professional participation.

Job Contentment

Job contentment is postulated to be a more profound and sustainable type of job satisfaction than job satisfaction. Job satisfaction normally encompasses workers' appraisal of particular job aspects such as remuneration, support from the supervisors, workload or promotion. Job contentment is associated with an overall sense of satisfaction, significance, congruence and professional commitment. Consequently, job contentment is not viewed as an alternative to job satisfaction but rather as a more profound mechanism that is likely to be particularly relevant to chefs in terms of professional identification and commitment.

Job contentment may occur in the culinary field if chefs feel professionally proud, respected by the organisation, socially connected, and aligned with their career. A chef may accept the job-related pressures when there is a sense of professional meaning, development and job satisfaction. For instance, working long hours may be less detrimental if employees feel valued and their careers are advancing. Nonetheless, if culinary staff feel unvalued, stagnated and disconnected from their professional mission, job contentment may be low even if they are satisfied with the remuneration.

Job contentment matters because it explains how positive job experiences translate into sustained worker retention. Motivational factors such as empowerment, psychological resources and organisational work climate may make chefs feel valued, empowered, respected and satisfied. In turn, these experiences may contribute to a sense of meaning and career congruence. Ultimately, employees become committed to staying in the organisation. Hence, job contentment is postulated to be the psychological mediator between motivational characteristics and job retention.

Job Retention

Job retention relates to an employee's tendency to continue working within an organisation. In hospitality research, job retention is typically analysed alongside turnover intentions, organisational commitment, and employee loyalty. Job retention is important because loyal employees help achieve consistency in service provision, lower recruitment costs, and improve organisational culture.

For culinary professionals, job retention is particularly important because kitchen performance depends on teamwork and experience gained over time. With high turnover, there will be a lack of consistency in product processes, a heavy workload for those remaining in the kitchen, low morale, etc. Therefore, the retention process should involve creating a conducive environment where the employees would want to continue working.

It is argued that job retention among culinary professionals should be viewed through various psychological and motivational processes, including motivational attributes, job contentment, and job retention.

Generational Differences among Culinary Professionals

Today's hospitality staff comprises employees from various generational cohorts, but generation categorisations should be used with caution. Modern hospitality studies show that younger employees, especially Gen Zers, tend to value flexibility, technology, instant feedback, inclusiveness, learning, and work-life balance (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2025; Seyfi, 2024; Susanto et al., 2025). These results reflect generational tendencies, rather than universally inherent properties.

Hence, in culinary establishments, young employees can value more training, mentorship, creative engagement, feedback, and good leadership. Otherwise, some may be ready to leave the foodservice industry and choose another line of business. At the same time, the proposed framework does not presuppose that all young culinary professionals would behave similarly in this regard; rather, it suggests that such distinctions should be investigated empirically.

For their part, senior culinary professionals could appraise retention based on a combination of the following resources: appreciation of expertise, professionalism, leadership engagement, job security, and authority. The lack of evidence justifying generational generalisation means the proposed framework treats these tendencies as propositions, not predetermined outcomes.

Therefore, generational comparison is included to see whether the same structural relationships hold equal validity across groups. In this study, generational cohort is not treated as an additional causal factor or moderator in the structural model. Instead, generational cohort is treated as a grouping variable for Multi-Group Analysis.

Theoretical Underpinning

This paper is supported by three main theories: the Job Demands-Resources Model, Self-Determination Theory and Social Exchange Theory. These theories are selected because they explain different but complementary stages of the proposed retention process rather than serving as separate or competing explanations.

Job Demands-Resources Model

The Job Demands-Resources Model explains that employee well-being and work outcomes are shaped by the interaction between job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands refer to aspects of work that require sustained physical, emotional or cognitive effort. In culinary work, job demands include long hours, heat exposure, workload, time pressure, emotional stress, customer expectations and hierarchical pressure. If not properly managed, these demands can lead to strain, burnout, and turnover intention.

Job resources refer to aspects of work that help employees achieve goals, reduce job demands and support growth. In the culinary context, job resources include supportive leadership, sufficient staffing, adequate equipment, fair scheduling, teamwork, recognition, empowerment and training opportunities. When job resources are present, employees may be better able to cope with pressure and develop stronger job contentment.

The JD-R Model supports the proposed framework by explaining how motivational attributes function as job resources. Empowerment, psychological support and a positive work environment can reduce the negative effects of demanding kitchen conditions. These resources may strengthen job contentment, which in turn supports retention.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory states that human motivation depends on satisfying three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for autonomy involves feeling a sense of choice and control. Competence refers to the need to feel competent and effective. Relatedness is about feeling connected to and valued by others. This theory is also highly important for culinary professionals. Autonomy can be expressed through empowerment, decision-making, and participation. Competence can be developed through training, skill recognition, and career advancement. Relatedness could be developed through teamwork, leadership, and a respectful atmosphere in the kitchen. Fulfilling these needs could lead to higher motivation and job satisfaction among culinary professionals.

The theory also helps explain why employees may experience the same organisational resources differently. Autonomy can be supported through empowerment and meaningful participation; competence through skill recognition, development and confidence; and relatedness through teamwork, respectful leadership and organisational support. Rather than assuming that younger and senior professionals have fixed motivational profiles, the theory provides a basis for examining whether different cohorts derive contentment from these resources at different levels.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory suggests that relationships between employees and organisations are based on reciprocal exchange (Blau, 2017). When employees perceive that their organisation values, supports and treats them fairly, they are more likely to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviours such as commitment, loyalty and intention to remain.

In the hotel kitchen context, culinary professionals may develop stronger attachment when they feel supported by management, fairly rewarded, trusted by supervisors and respected as professionals. Conversely, when employees feel exploited, ignored or undervalued, they may reduce their commitment and seek employment elsewhere. This theory helps explain why organisational support and motivational attributes can influence job retention.

Rather than functioning as separate explanations, the three theories address complementary stages of the proposed retention process. The Job Demands-Resources Model explains how resources such as empowerment and a supportive work environment can help culinary professionals manage demanding kitchen conditions. Self-Determination Theory explains why these resources become psychologically meaningful when they support autonomy, competence and relatedness, thereby fostering deeper job contentment. Social Exchange Theory explains how favourable organisational treatment and support may be reciprocated through commitment, loyalty and intention to remain. In combination, JD-R explains the resource conditions, SDT explains the motivational internalisation process, and SET explains the reciprocal retention response.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature and theoretical discussion, this paper proposes a sequential conceptual framework in which motivational attributes influence job contentment, and job contentment subsequently influences job retention. Generational cohort is positioned outside the causal chain as a grouping variable for Multi-Group Analysis to determine whether the proposed structural relationships differ between younger and senior culinary professionals.

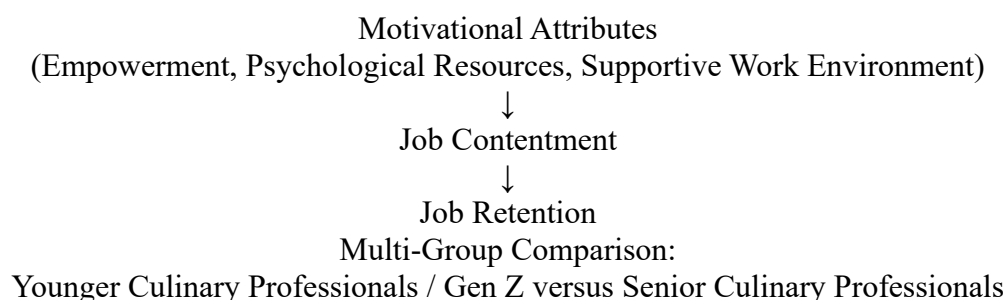


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The framework begins with motivational attributes, comprising empowerment, psychological resources and a supportive work environment. These resources are expected to strengthen job contentment because employees are more likely to feel fulfilled when they are trusted, psychologically capable and supported by a conducive workplace. Job contentment is then expected to enhance job retention because employees who experience deeper fulfilment, professional pride and value alignment may be more willing to remain. Generational cohort is not included as a causal variable in this sequence; instead, the model is compared across younger and senior culinary professionals to determine whether the strengths of these relationships differ between groups.

Hypotheses Development

Motivational Attributes and Job Contentment

Motivational attributes are expected to influence job contentment positively. Empowerment can strengthen feelings of trust and ownership, psychological resources can support confidence and well-being, and a supportive work environment can reduce unnecessary strain and promote belonging. Collectively, these resources may create conditions in which culinary professionals experience greater fulfilment, meaning and professional alignment.

H1: Motivational attributes have a significant positive influence on job contentment among culinary professionals.

Job Contentment and Job Retention

Job contentment is expected to influence job retention positively. Culinary professionals who feel fulfilled, respected and aligned with their professional identity are more likely to remain in their organisation. Unlike job satisfaction, which may depend on immediate job conditions, job contentment reflects deeper emotional and professional attachment. Employees who experience contentment may be more willing to stay because they perceive their work as meaningful and valuable

H2: Job contentment has a significant positive influence on job retention among culinary professionals.

Mediating Role of Job Contentment

Job contentment is proposed to mediate the relationship between motivational attributes and job retention. Motivational resources may not lead to long-term retention merely because they are present; employees must also experience these resources as meaningful, supportive and fulfilling. Empowerment, psychological resources and a supportive work environment may therefore strengthen job contentment, which can subsequently increase intention to remain. The mediating proposition captures this internalisation process by explaining how positive work resources translate into deeper attachment to work and, ultimately, retention

H3: Job contentment mediates the relationship between motivational attributes and job retention among culinary professionals.

Generational Cohort Comparison

Generational cohort is positioned as a grouping variable for comparative analysis rather than as a direct causal construct in the structural model. The purpose of the comparison is to determine whether the proposed paths operate with different strengths between younger and senior culinary professionals. This approach avoids assuming that generational differences necessarily exist and instead treats such differences as an empirical question to be tested using Multi-Group Analysis.

- H4a: The relationship between motivational attributes and job contentment differs significantly between younger and senior culinary professionals.
- H4b: The relationship between job contentment and job retention differs significantly between younger and senior culinary professionals.
- H4c: The indirect effect of motivational attributes on job retention through job contentment differs significantly between younger and senior culinary professionals.

Proposed Methodology

Although this paper is conceptual, the proposed framework can be empirically tested using a quantitative research design. A quantitative approach is suitable because the study involves measuring relationships among latent constructs, testing mediation and comparing structural relationships across groups. The target population would consist of culinary professionals working in Malaysian hotels. Respondents may include commis chefs, Demi Chef de Partie, Chef de Partie, Sous Chefs and senior chefs, provided that clear inclusion criteria are established in the subsequent empirical study.

A structured self-administered questionnaire may be used as the main data collection instrument. The questionnaire should include demographic profile, employment background, generational cohort, motivational attributes, job contentment and job retention. Operationalise generational cohort using a clearly defined age-based classification before data collection. Cohort membership would be used to form comparison groups for analysis rather than modelled as an additional latent variable.

The measurement of motivational attributes may include items related to empowerment, psychological resources and supportive work environment. Empowerment items may assess autonomy, participation in decision-making and authority in task execution. Psychological-resource items may assess confidence, emotional well-being, optimism and professional identity. Work-environment items may assess leadership support, teamwork, safety, resources and organisational culture. Job contentment items may measure fulfilment, pride, meaningfulness and alignment with work values, while job retention items may measure intention to stay, organisational loyalty and long-term career commitment.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling is proposed as the main data analysis technique. PLS-SEM is appropriate because it allows researchers to test complex relationships among latent constructs, including mediation effects and predictive models (Hair et al., 2021; Ramayah et al., 2018; Sarstedt et al., 2021). The analysis can be conducted in two stages: measurement model assessment and structural model assessment. Measurement model assessment should examine reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Structural

model assessment should examine path coefficients, coefficient of determination, effect sizes, predictive relevance and mediation effects.

To examine generational differences, Researchers can conduct Multi-Group Analysis after establishing satisfactory measurement quality across the comparison groups. MGA would allow researchers to test whether specific structural paths and the indirect effect differ significantly between younger and senior culinary professionals. This approach is consistent with the conceptual role assigned to generational cohort in the framework: it is a grouping variable used to compare model relationships rather than a direct causal predictor. The analysis can therefore provide empirical evidence on whether retention mechanisms operate differently across cohorts.

Theoretical Contributions

This paper offers several theoretical contributions. First, it extends chef-retention literature beyond conventional reward-based explanations by proposing a sequential mechanism in which broader motivational attributes influence retention through job contentment. The contribution is therefore not simply adding more retention factors but explaining how organisational and psychological resources may be internalised as deeper fulfilment before they influence willingness to remain.

Second, the paper distinguishes job contentment from job satisfaction. Job satisfaction remains important for understanding evaluations of particular job conditions, whereas job contentment is positioned as a broader, more enduring state of fulfilment, professional meaning, and value alignment. This distinction may be especially relevant in culinary work, where professional identity, pride in craft and attachment to one's occupational role can extend beyond immediate satisfaction with individual job features.

Third, the paper introduces a generational comparative perspective without treating generational categories as deterministic. Rather than assuming that younger and senior culinary professionals have fixed motivational preferences, the framework uses cohort membership as a grouping variable to test whether the structural relationships differ across groups. This provides a more cautious and empirically testable approach to workforce heterogeneity.

Finally, the framework's novelty lies in integrating three previously fragmented perspectives within a culinary-specific retention model: motivational resources, deeper work contentment, and generational heterogeneity. The Job Demands-Resources Model explains the resource conditions, Self-Determination Theory explains the psychological internalisation of those resources, and Social Exchange Theory explains the reciprocal retention response. Their integration provides a coherent theoretical sequence rather than three parallel explanations

Practical Contributions

The proposed framework offers practical value for hotel managers, executive chefs, human resource practitioners and hospitality policymakers. Fair pay remains essential, but the framework suggests that retention diagnosis should also consider whether culinary professionals experience sufficient empowerment, psychological support, conducive working conditions, professional recognition and growth opportunities.

The framework also supports developing targeted retention strategies based on evidence rather than assumed generational stereotypes. For example, learning opportunities, feedback mechanisms, flexible work arrangements and participation in decision-making may warrant greater attention for some younger professionals, while recognition of expertise, leadership involvement, stable career pathways and meaningful authority may be more salient for some experienced professionals. These differences should be guided by empirical cohort comparison rather than treated as universal generational preferences.

A further implication concerns job contentment. Hotels can strengthen retention efforts by creating conditions that allow culinary professionals to feel proud, valued and fulfilled in their work. This may involve recognising culinary creativity, providing career development, improving communication, supporting professional autonomy and maintaining a respectful kitchen culture.

Finally, the framework can help managers diagnose retention problems more accurately. Rather than assuming that turnover is primarily caused by salary dissatisfaction, managers can examine whether employees lack empowerment, psychological resources, supportive work conditions, professional meaning or a sense of value alignment. Such diagnosis can lead to more focused retention interventions.

Conclusion

Employee retention among culinary professionals remains a significant challenge in the Malaysian hotel industry. While salary and rewards remain important, they do not fully explain why culinary employees stay or leave. The demanding nature of culinary work requires a broader account of the organisational resources and psychological processes that support longer-term attachment.

This conceptual paper proposes a sequential framework in which motivational attributes - empowerment, psychological resources and a supportive work environment - strengthen job contentment, which subsequently enhances job retention. Generational cohort is positioned as a grouping variable for Multi-Group Analysis, allowing the proposed structural relationships to be compared between younger and senior culinary professionals without assuming that generational differences are universal.

The Job Demands-Resources Model, Self-Determination Theory and Social Exchange Theory support the framework. Together, these theories explain how supportive resources can help employees manage demanding work, become psychologically meaningful through the fulfilment of basic needs, and encourage reciprocal commitment and intention to remain. The paper therefore contributes by integrating motivational resources, deeper work contentment and generational heterogeneity in a culinary-specific retention framework.

Future empirical research should test the proposed framework using quantitative methods such as PLS-SEM and Multi-Group Analysis, with clear operational definitions of the generational cohorts and appropriate assessment of measurement quality across groups. Such research can determine whether the proposed retention mechanisms differ significantly between cohorts and can provide a stronger evidence base for targeted retention strategies in the hotel culinary workforce.

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