

EXPLORING DECLINE IN CULINARY STUDENT'S INTEREST IN ENTERING THE CULINARY INDUSTRY

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to investigate the reasons behind the decline in culinary students' interest in the field. Compensation, work-life balance, and professional growth prospects are the three primary criteria that this study identifies as influencing students' aspirations to pursue a career in this sector. The research methodology involves a quantitative approach through the supervision of culinary students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Puncak Alam. Data analysis using Pearson's correlation test and multiple regressions to measure the relationship between the variables studied. The research results show that work-life balance has the most significant influence on students' intentions to pursue a career in the culinary industry, followed by compensation. Meanwhile, career development opportunities have a weaker relationship with those intentions. This research demonstrates that culinary students have a greater impact on financial remuneration and well-being than they do on the long-term prospects for professional advancement. Therefore, to draw and keep new employees, the culinary business promotes better work-life balance and a more attractive benefits package. To make the culinary sector more appealing to recent graduates, educational institutions should also improve their course of study and training programs to provide students a more realistic view of the field.

Keywords: *compensation, work-life balance, career, advancement*

Introduction

The culinary industry is widely regarded as one of the most dynamic sectors within the broader hospitality landscape, yet it continues to grapple with talent retention challenges, particularly among recent graduates. Despite increased enrollment in culinary programs globally, a significant number of culinary students choose not to pursue careers in the industry upon graduation (Sulong et al., 2021). This phenomenon raises concerns for both industry stakeholders and educational institutions tasked with preparing graduates for professional integration. In the context of Malaysia, the youth unemployment rate remains a persistent issue, standing at 11.8% at the end of 2022, higher than the pre-pandemic level of 9.9% (Saali, 2024). Among the factors contributing to this trend is a mismatch between graduate expectations and industry realities. The culinary sector is particularly affected due to its demanding work environment, irregular hours, modest compensation structures, and perceived limited career mobility (Le et al., 2018). These concerns have sparked growing interest in understanding the motivational and deterrent factors shaping students' career intentions. Career decision-making is a complex process influenced by a range of cognitive, contextual, and outcome-based factors. This study adopts the Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) as its theoretical foundation, which posits that career intentions are shaped by self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and perceived environmental supports or barriers. Within this framework, compensation and career

advancement opportunities are conceptualized as outcome expectations, while work-life balance functions as a contextual support or barrier.

Previous studies have established that compensation remains a core motivator in job selection, especially for younger generations entering the workforce (Leung et al., 2024). At the same time, increasing attention has been given to work-life balance as a determinant of occupational well-being and long-term career sustainability (Park et al., 2017; Brough et al., 2014). Career advancement, while generally associated with long-term professional satisfaction, may be perceived as unattainable or unclear in the culinary profession, thus diminishing its motivational value. Given the increasing disconnect between student aspirations and industry conditions, this study seeks to explore the extent to which these three factors: compensation, work-life balance, and career advancement; influence culinary students' intentions to pursue a long-term career in the culinary industry. This investigation is situated at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Puncak Alam and aims to provide empirical insights that can inform both curriculum development and industry-level retention strategies. By addressing this research gap, the study contributes to ongoing discourse surrounding workforce development in the culinary field and aligns with national efforts to enhance graduate employability in Malaysia. Ultimately, understanding these determinants is vital to formulating responsive educational strategies and more sustainable human capital practices within the culinary profession.

Literature review

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent et al. (1994), has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for understanding career development. Rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory, SCCT emphasizes that career intentions and choices are not only shaped by individual interests or abilities, but also by social, cognitive, and contextual influences. The theory introduces three core constructs that directly influence career decision-making: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and perceived supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform tasks or behaviours necessary to achieve specific outcomes. In career terms, this means students are more likely to pursue a certain profession if they believe they can succeed in that environment. Outcome expectations pertain to the anticipated results of engaging in a particular career such as financial stability, recognition, or personal fulfillment. Contextual supports and barriers include environmental factors such as family influence, institutional support, industry conditions, and societal norms that can either facilitate or inhibit one's career pursuits (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT posits that individuals are more inclined to choose and persist in career paths where they feel capable, expect favourable outcomes, and perceive fewer contextual obstacles. In the context of culinary education, this theory is particularly relevant, as students weigh their confidence in kitchen or hospitality skills (self-efficacy), expectations of financial compensation and career progression (outcome expectations), and industry work conditions such as work-life balance or long working hours (contextual barriers/supports).

Several studies have used SCCT to explore career decision-making in the hospitality and tourism fields. For example, Chuang and Dellmann-Jenkins (2010) found that hospitality students' career intentions were significantly influenced by perceived

employer support and career growth opportunities. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) demonstrated that factors such as salary perception, career progression, and quality of work-life played a pivotal role in shaping Malaysian hospitality students' career aspirations. These findings suggest that students' career intentions are not solely based on personal interest in the industry but are deeply shaped by how they evaluate potential rewards and constraints. In Malaysia, the culinary profession is often perceived as demanding, with long hours and low starting pay. However, the rise of celebrity chefs, food tourism, and global culinary exposure has elevated the visibility and appeal of culinary careers. Still, if students perceive that the outcome expectations (e.g., fair salary and career progression) are not aligned with their effort, or if contextual barriers such as poor work-life balance dominate, their intention to remain in or enter the industry diminishes even if they have passion or culinary skills (Kenayathulla et al., 2019). This study applies SCCT to investigate how compensation, career advancement, and work-life balance influence job pursuit intention among culinary students. Compensation and career advancement reflect outcome expectations, as they pertain to tangible rewards students anticipate in the profession. On the other hand, work-life balance is conceptualized as a contextual factor, where positive balance serves as a support, and imbalance becomes a barrier. By integrating these constructs into a theory-driven model, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of culinary students' career motivations, advancing both theoretical knowledge and practical recommendations for educators and employers.

Compensation and career intention

Compensation is consistently identified as a key factor influencing job attractiveness, motivation, and career retention. In the SCCT model, compensation aligns with positive outcome expectations, meaning individuals are more likely to pursue careers that offer financial rewards commensurate with their efforts. Salary plays a crucial role in shaping job acceptance decisions, especially among graduates in high demand yet high-pressure fields such as hospitality and culinary arts. However, in the Malaysian context, entry-level positions in the culinary field are often associated with long hours and comparatively low wages. Such discrepancies may lead students to question the return on investment for their culinary education, ultimately weakening their intention to remain in the field. When students perceive a misalignment between effort and compensation, their outcome expectations are negatively affected, resulting in reduced motivation to enter or stay in the industry.

Work-life balance and career intention

Work-life balance is increasingly recognized as a vital factor in job satisfaction, productivity, and long-term career sustainability. Within SCCT, work-life balance represents an environmental support or barrier, shaping the context in which career decisions are made. For many in the culinary field, the industry's demanding schedules and high-pressure environments serve as a deterrent. This is particularly relevant to millennial and Gen Z workers, who tend to prioritize well-being and flexibility over traditional career incentives. Research by Achieving work-life balance involves the ability to fulfil personal, social, and professional responsibilities without chronic stress or role conflict. In the culinary context, imbalance often leads to burnout, dissatisfaction, and ultimately attrition. Students who anticipate poor work-life

integration may pre-emptively opt out of pursuing culinary careers, regardless of their skill or training.

Career advancement and career intention

Career advancement refers to perceived opportunities for growth, promotion, and long-term professional development. According to SCCT, when individuals expect meaningful advancement opportunities, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that lead toward those goals. Conversely, limited advancement prospects reduce outcome expectations and hinder career commitment. Although advancement is a commonly cited motivator, research suggests that in hospitality and culinary sectors, clear career pathways are often lacking. This ambiguity may dampen students' enthusiasm for remaining in the industry. While career development is important, many culinary students may prioritize short-term outcomes like financial reward and work-life balance, particularly if advancement seems distant or uncertain. This aligns with who argue that perceived alignment between individual skills and career progression is essential for sustained career intention.

Conceptual framework and hypothesis

The conceptual framework can be shown in *Figure 1*. The hypothesis are include: (H1): There is a significant positive relationship between compensation and culinary students' intention to pursue a career in the culinary industry; (H2): There is a significant positive relationship between work-life balance and culinary students' intention to pursue a career in the culinary industry; (H3): There is a significant positive relationship between career advancement and culinary students' intention to pursue a career in the culinary industry. Factors affecting job pursuit intention in hotel industry in Ho Chi Minh, Viet Nam. *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 7(11), 281-290.

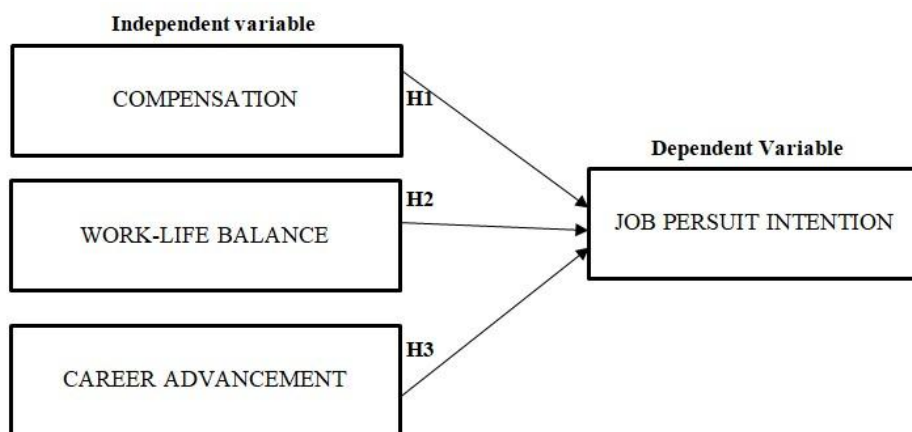


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The majority of participants were between 25 to 34 years old (54.7%), followed by 18 to 24 years old (44.0%). A small proportion (1.3%) were aged between 35 to 44 years. In terms of gender, 53.3% were male and 46.7% were female. Most respondents were single (90.7%), and the majority (78.0%) were currently enrolled at UiTM Puncak Alam. In terms of academic level, 60.0% were pursuing a bachelor's degree, while 19.3% were Diploma students, 11.3% Master's, and 9.3% Sijil holders. The highest percentage of respondents were in Part 6 (48.0%), indicating their final semester of study. Based on *Table 2*, the internal consistency of all scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. Results indicate strong reliability across all variables. Compensation, work-life balance, and job pursuit intention each achieved a value of $\alpha = 0.91$, while career advancement showed acceptable reliability with $\alpha = 0.82$. *Table 3* indicates that both compensation and work-life balance had strong and statistically significant positive correlations with job pursuit intention, with correlation coefficients of 0.64 and 0.67 respectively ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that as students perceive better compensation and work-life balance in the culinary field, their intention to pursue a career in the industry also increases. In contrast, career advancement showed a much weaker correlation of 0.27, though it was still statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$). While this indicates a positive relationship, the low coefficient suggests that career advancement is not a strong influencing factor in shaping students' career intentions compared to the other two variables. Overall, the results show that compensation and work-life balance are the primary factors associated with job pursuit intention, while career advancement has limited influence, despite reaching statistical significance. None of the variables had a negative or non-significant correlation (i.e., all p-values were < 0.05), indicating that all three variables are related to the outcome variable, but to varying degrees of strength.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondent (N = 150).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-24	66	44.0
	25-34	82	54.7
	35-44	2	1.3
Gender	Male	80	53.3
	Female	70	45.7
Marital status	Single	136	90.7
	Married	14	9.3
Institution	UiTM Puncak Alam	117	78.0
	Other instistution	33	22.0

Table 2. Reliability test.

Variable	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Compensation	2	0.91
Work-Life balance	5	0.91
Career Advancement	5	0.82
Job Pursuit Intention	3	0.91

Table 3. Pearson correlation analysis.

Variable	Job pursuit intention	Sig. (2-tailed)
Compensation	0.64	0.00
Work-Life balance	0.67	0.00
Career Advancement	0.27	0.00

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of compensation, work-life balance, and career advancement on students' job pursuit intention in the culinary industry (*Table 4*). The regression model was found to be statistically significant, as indicated by the ANOVA result ($F = 54.12, p < 0.001$). This suggests that, collectively, the three independent variables explain a significant proportion of the variance in students' career intentions. The R-squared value ($R^2 = 0.53$) indicates that 53% of the variation in job pursuit intention can be explained by the three predictors. This is considered a moderate-to-strong model fit for social sciences research. Looking at individual predictors Work-life balance had the strongest influence, with a standardised beta coefficient of $\beta = 0.43$ and a p-value of < 0.001 , indicating a statistically significant and positive effect. Compensation also showed a significant effect ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$), suggesting that better compensation is associated with higher intention to pursue a culinary career. In contrast, career advancement had a very weak beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.04$) and was not statistically significant ($p = 0.47$). This result suggests that career advancement opportunities do not significantly influence students' job pursuit intention in this study (*Table 5*). In simpler terms, while compensation and work-life balance positively influence students' decision to pursue a culinary career, career advancement has no significant effect, similar to how "board independence" in your earlier example had no correlation with company performance. These findings reflect a short-term motivation trend among students, where immediate benefits such as fair pay and a healthy work-life balance are more valued than long-term professional growth.

Table 4. Regression model summary.

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
1	0.73	0.53	0.52	0.91

Table 5. Anova model summary.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Regression	134.70	3	44.90	54.12
Residual	121.13	146	0.83	-
Total	255.83	149	-	-

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of compensation, work-life balance, and career advancement on culinary students' intention to pursue a career in the culinary industry, guided by Social Cognitive Career Theory. The findings reveal that both compensation and work-life balance significantly and positively influence students' job pursuit intentions, while career advancement does not have a significant effect. These results support existing evidence that Generation Z and younger millennials prioritise short-term tangible benefits such as pay and personal time over long-term career progression. From an SCCT perspective, compensation and work-life balance function as positive outcome expectations and contextual supports, both of which enhance motivation and career-related intention. In contrast, career advancement opportunities often perceived as ambiguous or limited in the culinary field may offer insufficient motivation at the early stage of career planning. Practically, these insights call for a realignment between industry conditions and graduate expectations. Employers should consider restructuring compensation packages and promoting healthier work-life arrangements to attract and

retain talent. Similarly, academic programs should expose students to realistic work environments while providing mentorship pathways that illuminate career progression opportunities. Theoretically, this study contributes to SCCT applications within hospitality education by validating its relevance in predicting career intention under both outcome-based and environmental variables. Moreover, the findings complement earlier hospitality studies while adding depth in the Malaysian culinary education context. Future research should incorporate variables such as self-efficacy, family influence, or passion for the profession to develop a more comprehensive SCCT-based model. Additionally, longitudinal or mixed-methods studies could provide deeper insights into how intentions evolve into career outcomes post-graduation. In conclusion, enhancing compensation and supporting work-life balance are critical for motivating the next generation of culinary professionals steps that are not only practical but essential for building a sustainable culinary workforce in Malaysia and beyond.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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