



University of Sassari
Department of Economics and Business
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Exploring employee attraction and retention in hospitality: A Marketing Perspective

Supervisor:
Prof. Giacomo DEL CHIAPPA

Candidate:
Anna Giuseppina SATTA

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Rationale for the study

This thesis is part of an industrial PhD programme, co-funded by a private company (Formazione Point s.r.l. – NexumStp S.p.A.), an Italian consulting firm with a business unit in Olbia specialising in HR consultancy. The research topic was identified collaboratively with the company, which initially proposed a broad area of interest—'welfare, human capital, and territory'—and was later co-jointly refocused, co-jointly with my supervisor, on the specific research area around which the PhD has been developed.

The topic was selected for its practical relevance in addressing critical challenges faced by the hospitality industry, particularly in the post-pandemic Italian context, where companies are currently facing increasing difficulties in attracting and retaining employees. These issues are central to ensuring workforce stability, organisational sustainability, and competitiveness in a sector characterised by high turnover and labour shortages. At the same time, adopting a marketing perspective and employer branding perspective, the research addresses significant gaps in the academic literature on hospitality employment and employee perceptions, thereby providing an opportunity to generate both theoretical contributions and actionable insights for industry practitioners.

General introduction

For decades, the tourism and hospitality industry has faced persistent challenges in employee retention and high turnover rates (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Chen & Qi, 2022; Yu et al., 2021). These issues were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused unprecedented labour shortages and reshaped how individuals perceive their roles and responsibilities within the broader social and economic context (Baum et al., 2020). The pandemic also contributed to the emergence of notable workforce phenomena, including the Great Resignation—where employees voluntarily leave their jobs in search of better opportunities, improved work–life balance, or more meaningful work (Cohen, 2021)—and Quiet Quitting, in which employees remain in their positions but restrict their effort to contractual obligations, disengaging from additional tasks or organisational initiatives (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Xia et al., 2023). In addition, skill mismatches, where workers’ qualifications and competencies do not align with job requirements, further complicate recruitment and retention efforts (CRILDA, 2024; Unioncamere & ANPAL, 2023). These developments present substantial challenges for managers, particularly in ensuring service quality and organisational performance in the hospitality sector.

Research overview and thesis structure

Despite growing interest in hospitality employment, recent research has not sufficiently explored the factors that motivate individuals to work in this sector or how job seekers perceive hospitality roles (Dogru et al., 2024), especially after the pandemic. Even fewer studies adopt an internal marketing perspective, focusing on the dynamics between employees and employers (Ladkin et al., 2023). Previous studies on hospitality work perceptions (Richardson, 2010; Lin et al., 2018; Ronda et al., 2020; Kapuściński et al., 2023) have mainly focused on specific generational cohorts or pre-pandemic contexts.

Broader research into perceptions toward hospitality employment remains limited, particularly in Italy, where no studies have systematically explored the heterogeneity of such perceptions or whether they vary according to socio-demographic characteristics. Furthermore, prior research has largely examined employer attractiveness from an external perspective—focusing on potential employees such as students or job seekers (Bharadwaj et al., 2021; Ronda et al., 2018). In contrast, the internal perspective, exploring how current employees perceive hospitality jobs and what drives their decision to stay, remains underexplored (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, the overarching aim of this thesis is to provide a holistic understanding of the psychological and structural drivers (including personal motivations, attitudes and values) that shape the attractiveness of hospitality employment. Specifically, the thesis aims to demonstrate how these insights can inform the development of effective internal marketing and employer branding strategies to enhance attraction and retention in the post-pandemic era.

This thesis addresses these gaps through three complementary studies.

Chapter 1 presents a qualitative study exploring the factors and values influencing employees' attraction to and retention within the hospitality sector. Using semi-structured interviews and the Theory of Consumption Values as a theoretical framework, it investigates how individuals perceive hospitality jobs and the values they associate with them. The findings contribute to the scientific debate around the analysed research area, meanwhile providing suggestions to inform internal marketing strategies and employer branding initiatives that can be planned and executed to improve workplace attractiveness and employee retention.

Building on these qualitative insights, **Chapter 2** further examines perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality employment among Italians. Using an exploratory factor cluster analysis, the study contributes to the current body of knowledge investigating whether these perceptions and attitudes are homogeneous across the population and how they vary according to socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and education. This provides a nuanced understanding of how different groups perceive hospitality jobs and provides actionable insights to hospitality marketers attempting to sustain their employer brand.

Chapter 3 complements the previous studies by focusing on employee retention and the internal perspective of employer branding. Through qualitative laddering interviews with hospitality employees guided by the Means-End Chain theory, it investigates the links between job attributes, perceived benefits, and underlying personal values, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for retention strategies.

Together, these three studies integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics underlying hospitality employment, with particular reference to the post-pandemic Italian context. By integrating insights on personal motivations, attitudes, and values from both current employees and potential job seekers, this thesis contributes to the literature on internal marketing, talent management, and employer branding, while offering actionable recommendations to enhance workforce stability and organisational performance.

Chapter 1

Exploring employee values in the hospitality sector: An internal marketing approach

Exploring employee values in the hospitality sector: An internal marketing approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered perceptions of work and life worldwide, intensifying the challenges managers face in attracting and retaining staff, particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as hospitality. While previous literature has extensively examined this topic from a traditional human resource-based theoretical perspective, fewer studies have applied marketing-based theories to support the adoption of internal marketing strategies to attract and retain employees. This study adopts the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) to examine the values and related motivations driving employment choices within the hospitality sector. To this end, 81 in-depth interviews with current and prospective employees were conducted, providing useful insights into the interpretive power of TCV (social, functional, conditional, epistemic, transformative, emotional, and hedonic value) for describing employees' commitment toward hospitality employers. In addition to its theoretical contribution, the study offers practical recommendations for employers attempting to enhance the attractiveness of their workplace.

Keywords: hospitality employees; Theory of Consumption Values; internal customer, internal marketing, hospitality management

1.1 Introduction

For decades, the hospitality sector has struggled with low employee retention and high turnover rates (Chen & Qi, 2022; Yu et al., 2021). This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Formica & Sfodera, 2022), which led to major societal-level reconsiderations on the meaning of professional and personal lives. As a result, many employees have decided to disengage from work (Xia et al., 2023), or to leave their jobs and pursue alternative employment opportunities (Cohen, 2021; Liu-Lastres et al., 2022) thus giving rise to 'Quiet Quitting' or the 'Great Resignation' (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). Moreover, the increasing imbalance between labour supply and demand constitutes a challenge for the industry that needs to be addressed in order to ensure its long-term

sustainability (WTTC, 2022).

Scholarly research recently investigates psychological and emotional issues of hospitality staff, such as stress and burnout during and after the pandemic (Ayachit & Chitta, 2022; Camilleri et al., 2024; Liu-Lastres et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021), and the increasing relevance individuals attribute to work-life balance and its impact on their well-being (Chen & Qi, 2022; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002; Zhao et al., 2016). Attention has also been devoted to analysing the overall impacts of the pandemic on the hospitality industry to predict future labour market trends (Dube et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Orphanidou et al., 2023; Seyitoğlu et al., 2023). These recent analyses have highlighted the need to consider multiple organisational factors influencing employees' commitment to the industry beyond the notion of wealth (Ladkin et al., 2023; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there is a lack of recent research that specifically focuses on the current factors that motivate individuals to work in the hospitality sector and on how job seekers perceive hospitality jobs (Dogru et al., 2024). Even fewer studies attempt to address this research gap from an internal marketing perspective, considering employee/employer dynamics (e.g., Ladkin et al., 2023).

The present research considers employees as 'internal customers' (George & Gronroos, 1991; Lings, 2004) and applies the Theory of Consumption Values (Gallarza et al., 2015; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook, 2002; Sheth et al., 1991) to identify value types influencing hospitality employees' attraction and retention.

The study aims to address the following questions:

- (1) What are the main work-related factors (job characteristics) that influence employees' experiences and needs in the hospitality sector?
- (2) What are the main values that employees seek from a hospitality-related employer?

Besides its theoretical applications, the study aims to demonstrate how the identification of these work-related factors and values can provide useful insights for hospitality managers seeking to develop targeted internal marketing and employer branding strategies.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Working in the hospitality sector in the post-pandemic era

The hospitality industry has long been characterised by low wages, long working hours, and high seasonality, which have negatively influenced people's perceptions of the sector (Stangl et al., 2024). As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated such existing issues, with effects such as job insecurity and organisational changes significantly altering job seekers' attitudes and behaviours in the labour market (Bajrami et al., 2021; Nyamunda, 2022). As a result, recent studies indicate that the industry is perceived unfavourably by employees, particularly about job security and working conditions (Chen & Qi, 2022; Zhao et al., 2016). Along with hospitality workers carrying the burden of developing strategies to cope with stress (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024), a lack of awareness of the multifaceted career prospects available within this industry is also demonstrated (Orphanidou et al., 2023). This combination of negative perceptions and limited awareness represents a challenge for hospitality employers' efforts to attract and retain talent. Such an issue contributes to an imbalance between labour supply and demand (Kwok, 2022), as many skilled workers tend to overlook the sector when seeking employment.

In line with these global trends, similar recruitment challenges have emerged on a national level. Italy is an example of post-pandemic tourism recovery, rising to the 4th most visited country in the world (Statista, 2025). To sustain the yearly growth in international tourist

arrivals, it is estimated that 760,000 staff members will be needed by 2027 to fuel the needs of the Italian tourism and retail sectors, including food service and hospitality (CRILDA, 2024). However, the Italian hospitality industry faces considerable difficulties in recruiting personnel, especially for concierge, front-of-house, and kitchen staff roles, further exacerbating the widespread mismatch between available jobs and qualified applicants (Unioncamere & ANPAL, 2023).

A rise in salaries has usually been identified as a key measure for counteracting negative perceptions of the hospitality industry and improving its competitiveness against other career options (Dogru et al., 2024; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). However, Brien et al. (2017) suggest that similar to other types of organisations, the contemporary hospitality workforce also strives to align with their individual values, thus seeking meaning and purpose in their work, beyond financial compensation (Durand & Ioannou, 2023). This includes a search for a more balanced work-life dynamic (Formica & Sfodera, 2022), which can, in turn, enhance both productivity and psychological well-being (Chen and Qi, 2022; Zhao et al., 2016). In response to these cultural shifts, hospitality practitioners need to adopt strategies, such as internal marketing, which facilitate a deeper understanding of the evolving expectations and values of both current and prospective employees (Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

1.2.2 Internal marketing and hospitality employees

Internal marketing was developed in service research with the primary aim of improving employees' satisfaction for better service delivery (Berry, 1981; George & Gronroos, 1991). Also described as managing an organisation's human resources with a marketing approach, internal marketing emphasises aligning organisational and employee values to enhance job satisfaction, commitment, and performance (George & Grönroos, 1991; George, 1990). This approach is based on organisations' strategic view that satisfied and

motivated employees are more likely to foster positive customer interactions and consequently develop a competitive advantage (George & Gronroos, 1991). Gummesson (1987) extends this concept, suggesting that employees should be viewed as internal customers, with their needs, expectations, and behaviours being given equal importance to those of external customers (Gremler et al., 1994; Lings, 2004). In this vein, Gremler et al. (1994) broaden the application of methodologies employed to analyse external service encounters to encompass internal ones and demonstrate that internal customers (employees) respond similarly to external customers in terms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on comparable events and behaviours exhibited by service providers. Higher employee satisfaction results in enhanced service quality, creating a positive feedback loop that benefits business performance and customer experience (Karatepe, 2013; Varey, 1995).

In hospitality management research, the internal marketing approach has also been introduced with the initial purpose of aligning employees' values to the organisation's culture for improved service quality (Gjurašić & Marković, 2017; Ruizalba et al., 2014). However, in addition to improving competitive advantage, adopting an internal marketing approach can have employee-oriented benefits. By fulfilling employees' needs, organisations can reduce turnover, retain talent, and improve productivity and competitive advantage (Brown et al., 2025). When employees perceive congruence between their values and the mission and culture of the organisation, they exhibit greater interest and engagement towards the current/prospective employer (Durand & Ioannou, 2023). In this regard, recent research underscores the strategic relevance of internal brand management, emphasising the necessity for hospitality firms to cultivate employee commitment to the brand as a critical determinant of organisational success (Koo & Curtis, 2019).

Overall, the aforementioned considerations suggest adapting tools and frameworks originally designed for external customers (e.g., the theory of consumption values) to better understand and manage internal customer (employee) behaviour. Viewing employees as key contributors to organisational success represents a shift towards employee-centric management. This approach integrates concepts from marketing, HRM, and organisational behaviour, thereby promoting a more comprehensive understanding of how organisations can achieve their strategic objectives while effectively attracting and retaining talent.

1.2.3 The Theory of Consumption Values

The concept of perceived value has been extensively examined by marketing research primarily adopting a purely external customer perspective (Gallarza & Gil Saura, 2006; Holbrook, 2002). Perceived value is defined as a multifaceted construct indicating the balance between what is ‘obtained’ and what is ‘given’ for a product or service (e.g., Holbrook, 2002; Zeithaml, 1988). A prominent framework identifying multiple dimensions of perceived value is the Multidimensional Approach to Consumer Value (Gallarza et al., 2015). This framework incorporates the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) (Sheth et al., 1991), which has been applied in various contexts (Damijanec et al., 2022). In tourism and hospitality research, it has been employed from a consumption perspective example, in ecotourism studies (Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017) or to understand the types of values that influence choices of travellers of vegan or sustainable hotels (Baah et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2023). The TCV identifies five types of value contributing to effectively interpret the consumers’ decision making: functional, emotional, epistemic, social, and conditional. Functional value describes the practical, and utilitarian benefits a product or service offers, while emotional value refers to the feelings it evokes (Sheth et al., 1991). The epistemic dimension relates to curiosity and the desire for knowledge, and

social value derives from associations with specific reference groups. The conditional value dimension, finally, depends on specific circumstances that enhance a product's appeal when compared to alternatives (Sheth et al., 1991).

Overall, consumption values are subjective and vary between individuals, objects, and contexts (Holbrook, 1990), and according to the TCV, consumers assign different weights to these values according to their personal background and circumstances, resulting in a highly individualised perception of value (Gallarza et al., 2017).

As internal marketing applies marketing techniques traditionally adopted for external customers, the application of the TCV to internal customers (i.e., prospective and current employees) has the potential to provide a robust interpretative approach to understanding and meeting the multifaceted needs of employees. This is consistent with the emerging trend towards employee-centric strategies in both academic research and business practices (Ronda et al., 2018). The remaining part of the paper adopts a qualitative approach to explore the applicability of TCV for the analysis of needs and meanings associated with employment in the hospitality sector.

1.3 Methodology

This exploratory study is based on a qualitative methodology to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the research topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A constructivist and interpretive approach (Schwandt, 1998) was employed to explore the diverse and subjective interpretations of the phenomena through the theoretical lens of TCV, thereby facilitating the acquisition of nuanced insights from participants. The present research originated from a joint solicitation directed at the research team by Italian-based hotel establishments interested in investigating the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of employment in the hospitality sector. This 'industry-driven approach' reinforced the practical relevance of the study by aligning it with real-world business needs, thus

ensuring research relevance for both industry and the wider society (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2013; Sigala, 2021).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, following a protocol developed from existing literature as well as consultation with hospitality managers, enabling iterative refinement in accordance with the theory-in-use approach (Zaltman et al., 1982). The interview protocol was structured into two principal sections (presented in Appendix A). The first examined general perceptions of work and career, while the second focused on attitudes towards work within the hospitality sector, to identify the values that employees seek from employers. Participants were recruited through the personal networks of the research team members. These individuals referred additional participants, thereby achieving a snowball sampling procedure (Noy, 2008).

The study was set in Italy, given the current challenges affecting Italy's hospitality industry supply as an ongoing major issue, and both individuals with and without experience working in the hospitality industry were included to capture the nuanced factors affecting both employees and job seekers (Patton, 2010; Saunders & Townsend, 2016). The inclusion of participants with zero years of formal employment experience was intentional, as it allowed the research to capture the expectations and initial perceptions of potential entrants. It should be clarified that, in most cases, these respondents had previously gained some practical exposure to the sector through internships or short-term seasonal roles, which provided them with a sufficient basis to discuss their views on hospitality employment. Moreover, the participants with industry experience held a variety of roles, from entry-level to managerial positions, thereby offering diverse perspectives (Dassler et al., 2022).

Interviews were conducted between October and December 2022, either in person or via online platforms (Skype, Zoom, etc.) to accommodate the preferences of participants. The

appropriateness of online interviews has been largely demonstrated by the existing literature (e.g., Janghorban et al., 2014). A total of 81 semi-structured interviews were conducted, thus ensuring data saturation, with repeated patterns emerging and no additional information provided in subsequent interviews (Patton, 2015). The interviewees were audio-recorded with the permission of participants and then fully transcribed (generating a verbatim of 234,503 words).

Thematic analysis using NVivo14 software was conducted on the data to identify themes, similar concepts, and their relationships within the collected data. The analysis employed a combination of deductive (i.e., from TCV theory) and inductive coding (i.e., developing themes from the data) (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). The coding procedure involved structural coding to focus on sections pertinent to the research questions, followed by initial coding to identify similarities and differences and pattern coding to consolidate codes into broader themes (Saldaña, 2013). This process facilitated the identification of the primary values that shape interviewees' perceptions of work in the hospitality industry. To ensure coding validity, the research team collaborated in the development of the codebook and reviewed the entire coding process. The team engaged in collective interpretation of data, discussing and identifying emergent themes.

1.4 Findings

The subsequent section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected within this study, analysed through NVivo 14 software. First, and foremost, the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are outlined in Table 1.

The interviewees were fairly balanced in terms of gender (male: N=44; female: N=37). Additionally, they are distributed across different age brackets, with a predominant

number aged between 20 and 29 years. Participants also possess different levels of experience in the tourism and hospitality sector (≥ 6 years: 40). The sample included both employees and managers, as well as unemployed individuals, such as seasonal workers (unemployed at the time of the interviews), and job seekers. This diversity allowed greater depth and breadth of insights, providing a comprehensive understanding of individual views and attitudes toward hospitality employment.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Characteristics		Number of participants
Gender	Male	44
	Female	37
Age	18-29	28
	30-39	15
	40-49	16
	50-59	16
	≥ 60	3
Experience in hospitality (years)	0	21
	1-5	19
	6-15	23
	16-25	9
	26-35	5
	≥ 36	3
Employment status	Unemployed	18
	Employee	37
	Manager	13
	Entrepreneurs	13

Building on the TCV, the thematic analysis revealed the existence of several key values that influence the decisions of both current and prospective employees on pursuing employment opportunities within the hospitality industry, summarised and ordered by the number of participants' mentions in Table 2. These values encompass a range of dimensions, including social, functional, conditional, epistemic, transformative, emotional, as well as hedonic value dimensions, which collectively reflect the

multifaceted nature of individuals' motivations and preferences when considering careers in the hospitality sector (Table 2).

Table 2. Main values emerging from the qualitative analysis.

Value	Theme	Number of participants
Social	Collaboration	51
	Relationships	40
	Recognition	21
	Leadership	13
Functional	Fair compensation	52
	Fair benefits & perks	19
	Job security	14
	Self-sufficiency	7
Conditional	Work-life balance	30
	Flexibility & scheduling	23
	Dynamism	18
Epistemic	Learning opportunities	35
	Professional development	20
	Creativity	5
Transformative	Open mindset	24
	Identity building	11
	Empowerment	9
Emotional	Satisfaction	18
	Nostalgia	8
	Pride	5
Hedonic	Pleasure	23
	Enjoyment	4

1.4.1 Social value

Social value is based on the need for acceptance and approval from reference groups such as friends and family (Sheth et al., 1991). Among other significant types of value, social value was the most discussed by interviewees. In a service-oriented industry such as hospitality, meaning and self-acceptance were facilitated by cherishing positive and memorable interactions within the workplace and with

customers, potentially leading to employees' sense of belonging to the wider community and a stronger commitment to the organisation (Bae, 2023).

First of all, social value was discussed in the form of *collaboration* with colleagues and working as part of a team as a source of motivation and job satisfaction, involving the establishment of camaraderie, human rapport, and social skills development.

“Although I work alone in my office, I rely heavily on the front desk. For example, my shifts are based on theirs. When I’m not there, any necessary information is provided by the reception staff. So, I have a good relationship with the reception colleagues, and we always support each other. This is important in the workplace because there are needs on both sides that can’t always be ignored. For instance, if someone needs to avoid a morning shift, we adjust the day off accordingly.” (ID09)

Conversely, the lack of synergy with management figures and other employees and the potential presence of issues in working with disjointed teams were also mentioned as potentially affecting the attractiveness of working in the industry.

Interviewees underlined the benefit of establishing *relationships* through frequent interactions with customers and friendships with colleagues. As participants noted:

(Making) lots of friends, the front desk manager, the director... All the people I’ve met, and I’ve made friends with, while working here. At the beginning, we shared interests, then we found out more about each other, and we became friends due to our fondness as well as collaboration. (ID03)

From a human perspective, you meet so many new people. There are clients I’ve known for a lifetime—since we first opened—who used to come as children with their parents. Over the years, they returned with friends, and now with their own families. It’s such a beautiful relationship that develops, and seeing them again every year is wonderful. It’s not just about the connection with the clients but also with the people you work with. [...] I’ve built great relationships with them. Some are among my closest friends, and two are even my bridesmaids. This is something I truly love about this job. (ID54)

These interactions provide opportunities to build meaningful connections with guests, as well as colleagues, from different backgrounds.

Recognition played an important role in employees feeling acknowledged and appreciated by employers (Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhinphongs, 2016). Beyond financial and functional rewards, recognition was highlighted to be conveyed intangibly, in the way employers demonstrated their presence, treated the staff as valuable assets, and prioritised their staff's wellbeing.

Because from being just a number, if you know how to work, grow, and earn appreciation — not because you want to be appreciated, but because you do your job well — people will appreciate this, and you become a name, not just a number. We work because of our passion but also to support ourselves and support others. One of the things people seek right now is being recognised for what they do: recognition. Not just financial, but also emotional recognition. (ID70)

However, some participants noted:

[Organisations] often prioritise filling positions over recognising the individuals in those roles. They frequently overlook the value of employees with decades of experience. (ID02)

Another key aspect that emerged as crucial for shaping social value in the workplace is the role of managers in *leadership*. Charismatic and systemic managers can inspire, motivate, and facilitate effective networking among employees, as well as promote autonomy. However, participants reported being concerned with the absence of such competence and professional standards in hospitality leadership. To illustrate:

If you are in charge of a team, you cannot just give orders without leading by example. When you give orders, people follow them, but after a while, they forget the task. If you yell at them or call them worthless, eventually they will think: 'Why should I stay here?' Instead, if you involve them and make them feel, or actually be, a key part of the team, they'll give their best! They'll realise they need to grow to be

more appreciated. Being a boss is quite simple. Being a leader is something else entirely. (ID55)

An employer should make you feel like an integral part of a team! As a person and as a worker, not just as a hypothetical machine grinding out hours or merely completing tasks. [...] The best employers are those who, when assigning you a task, give you the freedom to express yourself and are open to being guided by the experience we've gained over the years. This creates an exchange, allowing you to build something together. (ID31)

Interviewees often assigned such shortcomings to the lack of formal education in management and leadership among those in managerial positions, as well as unmotivated employers who displayed limited professionalism in managing a hospitality business as a lifestyle activity.

The quotes in this theme illustrate how social experiences in hospitality jobs are vital in shaping employees' overall perception of their profession and in fostering a stronger commitment to their roles and the organisation.

1.4.2 Functional value

As a functional value, interviewees primarily discussed the utility that employees derive from their roles within the organisation, primarily through ensuring living wage and conditions in the longer term. Interviewees particularly highlighted the importance of *fair compensation*, which was a recurring functional theme in the interviews. Respondents noted that hospitality salaries often do not align with the sacrifices required, the tasks performed, the position held, and the stress associated with heavy workloads.

For instance, some interviewees stated:

If someone is working for you, they are dedicating their time, which they could spend working elsewhere or doing something else, to you. Therefore, at the very least, you should pay them fairly. (ID39)

Professional skills must be compensated because paying for them means recognising their value. I don't see the cost or salary simply as an expense; I see it as a way to assign value. A professional, whether male or female, has value, and that value must be compensated. To me, money is a means, a tool to recognise that value. It holds no other meaning for me: it has its purchasing power and various features, but ultimately, it's just a number that translates value. (ID55)

As such, along with its financial value, fair compensation was also viewed as a way of recognising the employee's skills and efforts in a challenging industry in uncertain times.

In addition, *fair benefits and perks* were also emphasised by several interviewees. Specifically, respondents indicated a preference for a range of benefits, including performance-based bonuses, goal-oriented incentives, and non-monetary benefits aimed at further supporting work-life balance and the well-being of employees and their families.

They need to contribute to investments beyond the professional sphere of a worker. We're talking about employee benefits—investing in people's well-being. This represents a significant step in retaining employees within the company. Raising salaries immediately would be economically unsustainable. A better investment would be in employee benefits, such as contributing to an insurance fund where employees know they have support from the company, providing childcare benefits, or educational support for their children. (ID80)

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of *job security*, which was often opposed to feelings of instability caused by the short-term contracts and seasonality characterising hospitality employment. The perceived lack of job security was particularly described as a factor that discouraged current employees and pushed them to reconsider their future in the hospitality sector.

One of the biggest challenges is that it is a very seasonal job. On one hand, it's also quite precarious because, for someone with a family or a mortgage, working only a few months doesn't offer the security that, for example, a job in a different sector would provide. (ID11)

If I had the guarantee of time, meaning permanence and not precariousness — that ensures I won't lose it from one moment to the next — it would be a job I'd do for life. (ID65)

Moreover, interviewees also recognised the functional value of work in the hospitality sector in terms of its ability to offer *self-sufficiency*. As some highlighted, hospitality employment provided a great opportunity to gain financial independence, especially as part-time job opportunities that were paired with other activities such as studying.

I did this job in my youth when I was still a student, and it kept me busy from early morning until around eleven. The pay was good, I had a proper contract with full rights, including pension benefits, and I could also earn a considerable amount in tips. This allowed me to balance my studies while making some extra money to cover my expenses. (ID69)

The job gave me the opportunity to become financially independent. I've always been a very independent person, so it was a very useful tool for me. Additionally, when you're at university and still studying, it's essential to gather resources, as education can be quite expensive. This job allowed me to provide myself with substantial financial support. (ID22)

1.4.3 Conditional value

Conditional values refer to specific factors and situations compared to alternatives (Sheth et al., 1996), which in this study differentiated the hospitality industry from different types of careers.

In particular, a healthy *work-life balance* was discussed as a crucial aspect of working in the hospitality industry, involving the capacity to accommodate employees' needs for

flexibility and to balance work scheduling and commitments with other life aspects such as family and leisure.

Starting when I want, or at least when it's best for me, would make a huge difference. Also, working remotely. It all comes back to managing my time, so it's not just about work. (ID16)

However, maintaining a work-life balance remains a significant challenge in the hospitality industry, with interviewees frequently citing intense working weeks with limited days off, irregular schedules, and last-minute changes in shifts as obstacles to maintaining personal well-being.

Working hours should be improved, perhaps by eliminating split shifts and implementing continuous shifts could make this job more appealing, also to younger generations. (ID64)

More shifts should be planned. Often this job is characterised by long hours and these long hours are paired with no days off in August. Hiring more staff would avoid increasing work hours and taking someone's day off. This approach could foster a greater sense of harmony within the company. (ID21)

This reflects the need for employees to have *flexibility* in their jobs, as well as more predictable and regular *scheduling* of shifts, which was also mentioned by a number of interviewees in order to accommodate personal needs and commitments.

Moreover, participants discussed how they appreciated the *dynamism* characterising their everyday - and sometimes unexpected - hospitality activities and exchanges.

The beauty of this job is its dynamism. Everything related to tourism is different every day because you never know who you'll interact with or what kind of situation you'll face. That's what makes it so stimulating. It could be a good growth opportunity. (ID02)

It's not a dull environment because it's a dynamic job that makes you grow from many perspectives and both personally and interpersonally. Maybe it's even better than routine jobs, doing the same thing, leading you to focus on that one thing. Here it's dynamic; you manage to grow while you interact with others, and you realise the mistakes you make while you interact with others, so it's fun. (ID01)

A variety of tasks, exchanges, and situations represented unique episodes that challenged the interviewees and made their experiences exciting when compared to other jobs that would be considered more static and repetitive.

It's a dynamic job, buying groceries, seeing the accountant, meeting potential suppliers and collaborators... So it's a dynamic job, and this is important. If you want to get up-to-date and want to grow, you can do wine tastings, olive oil tastings, you can learn new things about foods, look up the new trends in food and beverage, and on hospitality. So, it's a dynamic job. To me, this is the added value. And you meet different people all the time, with different experiences and ways to approach the service, the restaurant, the other person, so there is a series of important factors. (ID55)

1.4.4 Epistemic value

Epistemic value refers to the ability of work to arouse curiosity and satisfy a desire for knowledge (Sheth et al., 1991). In this regard, participants discussed their curiosity towards the “unknown” and the importance of *learning opportunities* and enhancing their skills and expertise. As some interviewees stated:

One thing I always enjoy is learning and discovering new things, so if the company invests in training me, I'd be very happy. (ID14)

One of the most important things that companies should do, and some already do, is provide training tools for their employees, such as language courses, continuous updates, and service improvement training. Additionally, courses in work psychology help employees improve their ability to interact with both colleagues and clients, thus increasing customer satisfaction and, at the same time, personal satisfaction for the employee at the end of the day. (ID69)

However, interviews revealed a significant weakness in the hospitality sector, namely in providing training and professional development opportunities. This issue was particularly pronounced when compared to interviewees working in larger hotels and chains offering a diverse range of opportunities for career advancement internationally.

The fact that the establishments are medium to large in size and often part of a larger brand makes career progression easier. With multiple establishments of varying categories, an employee who demonstrates exceptional skills and impresses senior management may be moved to a higher-tier establishment. (ID10)

Several factors contribute to this scarcity, including the size and structure of companies. Smaller and family-owned businesses, which are prevalent in the industry, frequently encounter difficulties in providing comprehensive training programmes due to limited resources and internal dynamics (e.g., Del Chiappa & Rashidin, 2024). For instance:

[...]Even when talented employees are ready for more important roles, there is often a preference for family members. This constrains non-family employees' career advancement and access to skill development programs. (ID16)

Notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges, many participants indicated that *professional development* opportunities and career advancement can exist within the hospitality sector, as a way to encourage and reward hard work in a fast-paced environment, as well as to explore new roles and cultivate ambition. As the following quote suggests:

Restaurants and hospitality businesses offer many growth opportunities, with a variety of roles available, from gardener to secretary, cook, chef, waiter, and more. One can start as a dishwasher and eventually become a manager. They truly offer many opportunities for career advancement. (ID25)

Professional development opportunities were not only envisioned as reaching managerial and executive positions, but also, in a wider sense, in developing entrepreneurial skills for starting independent service businesses in the future.

Interviewees also referred to their curiosity and desire to experience novelty and creativity when staying in a certain work environment (Sheth et al., 1991; Jamroz & Lawonk, 2017). *Creativity* specifically refers to employees expressing themselves through generating and applying new ideas, as well as creating solutions to challenges (Anderson et al., 2014; Stock et al., 2014).

In a perfect workplace, I can develop my creativity, which can be expressed in various ways, such as problem-solving or even in promotional campaigns to promote different products. (ID10)

In this vein, working in the hospitality sector was particularly described as an opportunity to be creative in different areas and as a stimulating environment.

First of all, the key element is creativity - avoiding the habit of always doing what others do, not sticking to the same dishes and becoming monotonous, but continuously reinventing ourselves, staying up-to-date with the times, and striving to give our best to the staff. (ID75)

1.4.5 Emotional value

In the TCV framework, emotional value refers to the variety of positive emotions and feelings (Gallarza et al., 2019; Sheth et al., 1991) that can be derived from the work environment and culture and play a role in job satisfaction and turnover intention (Hwang et al., 2011). Study participants described discrete emotions when discussing hospitality job perceptions (Hwang et al., 2011), encompassing feelings from general satisfaction to a sense of pride.

Employees felt a sense of *satisfaction* and contentment from giving their best, and a sense of reward through positive interactions, which were viewed as service feedback.

In the restaurant industry, the great advantage is that you perform a highly important and strategic job, but the satisfaction is renewed with every table that

comes, with every guest who recognises the value of the dishes you bring to the table, the value of the wines you've selected, and the value of the hospitality with which you accompany the dining experience. That type of experience, that kind of satisfaction, is renewed potentially—if you serve ten tables for lunch and ten for dinner—it's renewed twenty times a day, which adds up to one hundred and forty times in a week. That's important. (ID55)

Because, although it's a somewhat tiring job—more mentally than physically, in my opinion—it's also true that this mental effort allows you to experience great satisfaction when you see that you can accomplish many things and provide excellent service. (ID21)

The advantages include [...] the satisfaction it brings, like a marathon runner who, even without finishing first, feels fulfilled for achieving a major milestone. Ultimately, in the workplace, it's not about ranking but about giving your best—and that is deeply satisfying. (ID15)

Working in hospitality also evoked *nostalgia* as a mixed emotion (Hwang et al., 2011), especially for current employees reminiscing about previous experiences that they considered to be successful and learning opportunities.

My experiences in the mountains while working in Veneto were wonderful because, from an entrepreneurial perspective, they gave me the opportunity to engage with a large company and a reality completely different from mine—unlike anything I had ever known. I was high up in the Dolomites, in a setting I had never seen before, and it was exhilarating, incredibly challenging, and truly fascinating. There was also a cultural clash — you know, as a Sardinian arriving in the high mountains of Veneto, barely able to speak their dialects, not knowing how to ski. I didn't know how to do anything they did, but in the end, I have to say that I built some great friendships. So that, too, was a beautiful part of the experience. (ID14)

Nostalgic feelings also meant chasing the same passion that was sparked in their early experiences, and that they associated with hospitality and food service environments in the past. In fact, resonating with this study's broader themes, interviewees compared

previous ideas of the hospitality sector to its current state, discussing a greater priority placed on earnings rather than self-fulfilment through work, and an increased sensibility towards long work hours.

Maybe those entering the job market today are no longer as fascinated by this... Working in tourism isn't as glamorous as it used to be. It once had some charm, but now people prefer to do other things, and those who still want to pursue it make up just a small group compared to twenty years ago. (ID35)

Finally, emotional value was derived from employees' *pride* in the positive outcomes achieved from the interviewees' continued professional commitment, both in practical business results and the development of soft skills.

The company I worked for began to grow exponentially when I joined. The restaurant where I worked during the summer season was initially only able to reach a peak of barely 300 pizzas per night back in 1995. By 2000, we were making 1,280 pizzas per night. In just five years, I managed to quintuple the company's revenue, all thanks to my passion for this craft. (ID46)

When something goes well and the work succeeds, you feel proud because you were part of it, and you experience a sense of belonging. (ID68)

1.4.6 Hedonic value

Hedonic values refer to the *pleasure* and *enjoyment* (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982) that employees seek in their work environment. Organisations must cultivate a positive culture that encourages enjoyment and enthusiasm, as these factors contribute to enhanced job satisfaction and the promotion of constructive workplace behaviours (Michel et al., 2019). For example, employees recognised experiencing pleasure and enjoyment about their jobs, as reflected in the following statements:

I thoroughly enjoy it, and I go to work with the pleasure of doing so. (ID11)

If you do it with passion, you'll have fun. (ID44)

It's fun to do. Everyone complains and says it's a difficult job, but they all share an immense love for their job and keep doing it despite the challenges... (ID19)

1.4.7 Transformative value

Blocker and Barrios (2015, p. 1) describe the transformative value as the “social dimension of value creation that generates uplifting change for greater well-being among individuals and collectives”. As pointed out by existing literature (Decrop et al., 2019), self-actualisation, self-fulfilment, self-exploration, personal development, as well as processes such as learning through change and the construction or renewal of the self (Pera et al., 2016). It also involves the acquisition of knowledge and improvements in interpersonal relationships and social networks.

In this regard, interviewees frequently referred to job-related outcomes corresponding to transformative value, that is, outcomes going beyond benefits related to specific work tasks and spilled into the interviewees' personal lives. More specifically, participants referred to several themes describing the values that their job brings to them in terms of uplifting changes, building/renewing their self and their world views (Blocker & Barrios, 2015).

Beyond the professional sphere, participants discussed being employed in the hospitality industry as an opportunity of developing an *open mindset* (Stangl et al., 2024), to grow as human beings and improve personal skills beyond professional capabilities and notions.

You interact with people from different countries, and it offers the chance to learn about other cultures and ways of life. Additionally, beyond meeting many people, a key strength of the job is working closely with other cultures and ideas, which broadens your mind and helps you learn something new. (ID11)

The exposure to different ideas and lifestyles, and high social contact with individuals (both customers and colleagues) from different backgrounds, were particularly discussed by interviewees as a facilitator of psychological self-change as well as cultural exchange, thereby enhancing cross-cultural understanding and personal growth.

Among my strengths, I immediately think of personal growth. From my perspective, every season I work, I find myself becoming more open-minded. This field has not only helped me broaden my mindset but has also allowed me to develop more confidence and assertiveness. (ID21)

Furthermore, interviewees often identified the pursuit of *identity building* through work as a key motivation for working in the hospitality sector, where the variety and intensity of activities and face-to-face interactions, as well as travel opportunities, allowed individuals to flourish and become more self-aware of their life skills and meaning. In fact, working in the hospitality sector allowed entrepreneurial pursuits and the cultivation of different independent paths within the industry.

It should be a job that allows me to fulfil myself both professionally and personally, and to develop my skills. While no one can achieve everything they set out to do 100%, this job has allowed me to develop my strengths and abilities quite well, if not perfectly. (ID35)

There's also a need for fulfilment based on what you learn and what you realise you're good at. Over time, you get to know yourself and understand that, in my case, I'm better at building relationships, organising, and have a strong organisational side, while not suited for closed environments, office work, or a static, sedentary job. (ID55)

Furthermore, interviewees particularly appreciated the experience of *empowerment* when they were trusted by superiors and given responsibility in managing different departments or task areas.

I was given the possibility to be involved in helping with booking, with welcoming guests, and after a few years, I find myself in charge of managing personnel and the advertising side. They trusted me to grow fast. (ID06)

Being listened to and gradually being involved in increasingly challenging tasks were considered ways for employers to allow staff to grow and become more confident in their capabilities.

I found that in a few years of being in this business, I had found an employer who liked my initiative, my desire to experiment, and my energy. He let me grow very quickly and become good. So, I felt at home, free to do and work as much as I wanted and how I wanted. (ID01).

According to transformative service research, as also applied to tourism, employees underlined the role that their job experience might offer them in terms of personal growth, identity evolution, and expanded worldviews (e.g., Pung et al., 2020).

1.5 Discussion

The tourism industry has surpassed pre-pandemic levels of demand and travel flows, yet the hospitality and food service sector continues to experience labour shortages worldwide. Despite this persistent crisis in coping with increasing demand, little attention has been paid to examining the attributes of hospitality jobs that foster employment attraction and retention. The present study set out to investigate perceptions and values attached to the hospitality sector for prospective and current employees. It became apparent that social value is a primary factor in the evaluation of hospitality jobs, with employees deriving fulfilment from interpersonal relationships and collaboration with coworkers. This extends previous study results in the hospitality context, which highlight how perceived support from the organisation can contribute to stronger employee commitment (Bae, 2023), not only from the employer but also from collaborations with

colleagues and positive interactions with customers.

While salary represents a key factor in renewing hospitality jobs' appeal (Dogru et al., 2024), social value (collaboration, relationships, recognition, leadership) was hereby demonstrated to represent even more prominent aspects when considering employment opportunities in the hospitality industry. By examining employees' perspectives, such a finding confirms that raising salaries is not sufficient to solve the hospitality talent crisis (Liu-Lastres et al. 2024). Nonetheless, interviewees also emphasised the significant role of functional value, particularly in ensuring self-sufficiency and job security, further demonstrating job insecurity's influence on hospitality work-related attitudes, including job satisfaction and turnover intentions (Bajrami et al., 2021). Against other careers, work-life balance, flexible work arrangements, and dynamism were found to be important conditions of future hospitality jobs as solutions for addressing stress and adaptability needs (Seyitoğlu et al., 2023).

Hospitality careers also provide informal learning opportunities and creative expression (Lee et al., 2019; Stangl et al., 2024) as epistemic value. Nevertheless, the findings reveal a significant sector weakness: the lack of structured training and professional development. This limitation is often due to the prevalence of small and family-owned businesses, where internal dynamics or limited financial resources hinder long-term investment in human capital (Camilleri & Valeri, 2021; European Commission, 2016). Along with emotional (satisfaction, nostalgia, pride) and hedonic (pleasure, enjoyment), hospitality work experiences can provide transformative value by contributing to employees' overall flourishing through open-mindedness, identity-building, and empowerment.

1.5.1 Theoretical implications

A number of studies have highlighted the challenges faced by employees in the hospitality sector in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, few studies have adopted a theoretical lens to understand values and related attitudes attached by individuals to hospitality employment.

This study extends the application of the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) beyond its traditional domains of marketing and consumer behaviour research. While the TCV has been employed to shed light on consumer decision-making and behaviours, this study illustrates its relevance in understanding individual attitudes towards hospitality employment for human resource and branding management considerations. Thus, by integrating the TCV within an internal marketing framework—which focuses on treating employees as internal customers and aligning organisational practices to enhance employee satisfaction and engagement—the study offers a novel perspective on organisational and service-related dynamics where the role of pleasing and satisfying employees' expectations is seen as a key strategy to satisfy customers (Al Kurdi et al., 2020; Schlesinger & Zomitsky, 1991; Evanschitzky et al., 2011). A key contribution of this research lies in its exploration of the multidimensional nature of work-related values by adopting the theoretical marketing lens of Consumer Values. It moves beyond the traditional emphasis on utilitarian value to include a broader set of value dimensions (social, functional, conditional, epistemic, transformative, emotional, and hedonic). In line with an internal marketing approach, each consumer-oriented value was hereby enhanced to represent attitudes toward organisations and employment.

In particular, transformative value was identified as a novel and additional component of life enrichment and identity building through work for job seekers and current employees. From a theoretical standpoint, the study supports the co-creative dimension of value

among service actors through skills and competence exchanges (Vargo et al., 2017), ultimately benefiting employers and employees beyond customers. Such finding informs seminal research introducing the role of transformative value in extraordinary contexts such as community service ecosystems (Catahan, 2024). It thus extends its application to hospitality and food service, a sector also characterised by complex social dynamics and creative endeavours (Blocker & Barrios, 2015; Galeone & Sebastiani, 2021).

1.5.2 Managerial implications

This study provides insights for organisations operating in the hospitality sector, which continues to face persistent workforce shortages. By identifying the key values that shape perceptions of working in hospitality, the present research offers a foundation for developing clear internal marketing strategies aligned with what matters most to the workforce. Specific recommendations can be made to hospitality managers aiming to attract and retain talent, addressing the need to comprehend job seekers' perceptions (Dogru et al., 2024) and to meet employees' expectations (Stangl et al., 2024).

Attracting and retaining talent requires recognising that a complex set of social, emotional, lifestyle, and learning dimensions shapes overall hospitality job perceptions, along with utilitarian aspects such as pay and job security. While fair compensation remains a fundamental factor in employment decisions (Dogru et al., 2024), this study confirms that salaries alone might not represent a sufficient driver for job seekers, especially when compared to other career paths. Among other strategies, managers should consider skill-based compensation schemes that align pay scales with employees' competencies, enhancing recognition and highlighting fair benefits and perks, which in this study were found to be important social and conditional appeal factors.

Addressing job insecurity is also crucial: companies could emphasise the high

transferability of skills gained in hospitality roles and promote these positions as valuable training opportunities. Balancing uncertainty with scheduling and flexible working arrangements, as well as open communication (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023), would help create psychologically safe environments supporting employees' professional and personal growth (Stangl et al., 2024).

Recognition, collaboration among colleagues, and supportive leadership were found to be key social drivers of employer attractiveness. Organisations should promote a supportive work environment through targeted internal marketing strategies such as employee assistance programs, social and recreational initiatives, team-building activities, and structured peer recognition schemes (Bae, 2023). Training managers in effective leadership and implementing employee appreciation programs — e.g., “Employee of the Month” schemes — can also counter hospitality employees' feelings of underappreciation and boost morale and organisational commitment (e.g., Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhinphongs, 2016).

Conditional values, including work-life balance and flexible working arrangements, also emerge as important aspects to meet employees' evolving expectations (Bae, 2023; Seyitoğlu et al., 2023). Offering remote work, job autonomy, job sharing (Stangl et al., 2024), and non-monetary benefits such as health check-ups, additional vacation days, and partnerships with childcare centres or on-site daycare facilities, which study participants mentioned, along with day-off staff excursions.

Hospitality firms should provide ongoing training and career development programmes for structured learning, including promotion paths, workshops, and mentoring programmes (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024). Moreover, participants valued creative expression, being empowered, and a dynamic job setting, which managers can leverage to enhance

employee engagement. This can include involving employees in decision-making activities such as menu design, performance measurement, and customised service (Robinson et al., 2014; Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhinphongs, 2016).

Finally, hospitality managers could promote hospitality-related opportunities as a “tool” to undergo a journey of personal growth, identity evolution, and worldview development. By embracing a holistic, employee-centred approach grounded in the value dimensions identified in this research, hospitality organisations can not only improve recruitment and retention but also position themselves as employers of choice in an increasingly competitive labour market (Brown et al., 2025).

1.5.3 Limitations and future research

The research also has some limitations. Given the exploratory nature of this study, future research could use these findings to inform the development of a survey aimed at investigating associations between the identified values and constructs, such as job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and perceived organisational support, among others. When attempting to achieve this goal, following what has been recently proposed and tested in consumer research (Gallarza et al., 2022), future studies might attempt to propose and test a conceptual framework explaining how different types of value affect employee satisfaction and loyalty as interconnected factors, rather than assuming a simultaneous effect on employees’ behavioural outcomes. Meanwhile, future quantitative studies might consider the possibility to test the moderator effect that socio-demographic (e.g., gender, age, level of education, family life cycle, etc.) and psychographic characteristics (e.g., personality traits) might exert on employees’ needs and expectations and subsequent satisfaction/dissatisfaction and behavioural intentions (e.g., intention to stay/resign).

The present research identified a wide range of values rooted in a wide variety of attributes valued by both current employees and job seekers, sometimes reflecting contrasting expectations and preferences depending on their experience and career level (Lievens, 2007; Wilden et al., 2010). As such, future research could focus on examining antecedent factors of employee retention as a separate outcome from the attraction of new staff. It would also be useful to explore potential differences in perceptions among individuals occupying different hospitality roles and hierarchical positions. Future studies would need to be replicated, considering employees belonging to different countries; this would facilitate cross-cultural comparisons, thus enriching our scientific understanding of how employees' values and needs may vary across different cultural contexts.

Chapter 2

Perceptions and Attitudes toward Hospitality Employment in Italy: A Cluster Analysis Approach

Perceptions and Attitudes toward Hospitality Employment in Italy: A Cluster Analysis Approach

High employee turnover is a well-known challenge in the hospitality industry worldwide. In the post-pandemic era, companies continue to face difficulties attracting and retaining talent. While turnover has been widely discussed in the literature, little attention has been paid to understanding the extent to which individuals in Italy are willing to consider a career in hospitality. To address this, this study adopts a Talent Management (TM) framework to explore how individuals perceive and evaluate hospitality employment. A factor-cluster analysis was applied to profile a sample of 2,936 Italians, and four clusters were identified, namely ‘enthusiasts’, ‘moderately interested’, ‘resistant’, and ‘indifferent’. These segments differed based on their perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality work. The study also found a significant difference in terms of gender, age, employment status, and level of education. Conversely, they did not differ based on geographical residence and current position in hospitality. The findings provide insights into the heterogeneous perceptions of hospitality work, offering implications for Talent Management, employer branding, and workforce retention strategies. Theoretical contributions and managerial implications are addressed, including recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Hospitality employees; Cluster analysis; Talent Management; Italy

2.1 Introduction

The hospitality industry represents an important contributor to the global economy, making a significant contribution to GDP and employment worldwide. It offers a wide range of job opportunities and relies heavily on human labour to deliver high-quality experiences that shape customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Mattila & Enz, 2002). Yet, despite its importance, the sector faces significant workforce challenges. A recent forecast predicts a shortage of 8.6 million workers by 2035 (WTTC, 2025), and recruiting and retaining personnel remains difficult. Negative perceptions of hospitality jobs—including

low salaries, seasonal instability, and limited work-life balance (Chen & Qi, 2022)—coupled with a limited understanding of employees’ expectations (Orphanidou et al., 2023), further exacerbate these difficulties. These challenges have become even more pronounced in the post-pandemic context, which has reshaped priorities for both employers and employees (Baum et al., 2020).

Despite its relevance, employment in hospitality remains underexplored in the academic tourism literature (Ladkin et al., 2023). Given that job attractiveness and satisfaction vary according to individual expectations and aspirations (Charlesworth et al., 2014), understanding how people perceive hospitality jobs is therefore essential, as these perceptions influence their willingness to enter or remain in the sector. While some studies have examined perceptions of hospitality work (Richardson, 2010; Lin et al., 2018; Ronda et al., 2020; Kapuściński et al., 2023), they have primarily focused on specific generational cohorts or pre-pandemic contexts. Broader research into perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality employment remains limited. Research applying segmentation techniques to dig into our understanding about the perceptions and attitudes toward employment in the hospitality sector, and more specifically, aiming at understanding whether these perceptions and attitudes are homogeneous or not, and whether they eventually change based on sociodemographics and psychographics characteristics of individuals, remains limited; this is particularly evident in Italy where, to the best of the author’s knowledge, no studies exist so far devoted to this research area. This occurs despite the fact that having this knowledge would be extremely important for policy makers, hospitality associations, and hospitality managers attempting to render their sector and/or business more attractive and able to retain talent, thus mitigating the problem of talent shortages (CRILDA, 2024; Unioncamere & ANPAL, 2023).

This study adopts a micro-level perspective (Ladkin et al., 2023; King et al., 2021), focusing on individual perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality work rather than organisational-level metrics. This approach allows a nuanced understanding of heterogeneity among current and potential employees, providing insights particularly relevant for talent management strategies aimed at attracting, retaining, and developing human capital in a sector characterised by high turnover. By segmenting a sample of Italians based on their psychological profiles, the study identifies groups of individuals according to their perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality jobs and examines whether these clusters differ significantly in terms of age, gender, educational level, and employment status.

Specifically, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Do attitudes and perceptions toward hospitality jobs differ between groups of Italian individuals?

RQ2: Do individuals with different socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, educational level, etc.) have similar perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality jobs?

Findings from this research are expected to provide valuable insights for both academia and practitioners. By revealing distinct clusters of individuals, the study can inform targeted recruitment, retention, and development strategies, helping hospitality employers attract and retain talent more effectively. Ultimately, understanding the heterogeneity of employees' perceptions is essential to sustaining a competitive and resilient hospitality workforce, particularly in light of the labour shortages.

2.2 Literature review

2.2.1 Perceptions of hospitality jobs

The hospitality industry has historically been characterised by low wages, long working hours, and high seasonality. These factors have negatively shaped perceptions of the sector and continue to influence individuals' willingness to pursue a career in hospitality (Stangl et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, leading to widespread layoffs, increased turnover, and heightened job insecurity, which in turn affected job seekers' attitudes and behaviours (Bajrami et al., 2021; Baum et al., 2020). Consequently, the industry is often viewed unfavourably, particularly regarding job security, working conditions, and career stability (Chen & Qi, 2022; Zhao et al., 2016). Current and potential employees also face stress management burdens and limited awareness of the sector's diverse career opportunities (Liu-Lastres et al., 2024). Overall, structural constraints and evolving expectations make recruitment and retention a persistent challenge for hospitality organisations.

Given these challenges, understanding how individuals perceive hospitality jobs is essential. Such perceptions directly influence their willingness to enter or remain in the sector, and they vary across different groups of people. Previous research has mainly examined students' perceptions (Richardson, 2010; Lin et al., 2018) and generational cohorts such as Millennials (Ronda et al., 2020) and Gen Z (Kapuściński et al., 2023). These studies consistently highlight that perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality employment are not homogeneous, showing that age and generational differences shape distinct perceptions of work in the sector. Recent evidence also indicates that perceptions vary according to prior work experience, education level, and occupational role (e.g.,

Bednarska & Olszewski, 2016), emphasising the importance of segment-specific strategies.

However, broader research into hospitality employment perceptions, particularly in Italy, remains limited. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have applied segmentation techniques (such as cluster analysis) to identify distinct attitudinal profiles. Understanding nuanced perceptions across different segments is crucial, as it allows firms to tailor recruitment and retention efforts and informs the development of effective employer branding strategies in a competitive sector (Styven et al., 2022).

Research suggests that individual perceptions of hospitality employment are shaped by both intrinsic factors (e.g., personal growth, meaningful work) and extrinsic factors (e.g., pay, working conditions, career prospects) (Chang & Teng, 2017). Newcomers to the sector also form beliefs about the job based on their expectations and early interactions with employers, which can influence long-term attitudes and engagement (Blomme et al., 2013). Recognising this heterogeneity provides a foundation for more targeted human resource and talent management initiatives, enabling organisations to adapt their practices and enhance their ability to attract and retain talent.

2.2.2 The strategic value of employees in hospitality

In service industries such as hospitality, employees play a central role in co-creating value with customers and delivering high-quality services, which in turn enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Kim et al., 2013). Frontline staff are particularly influential, as their interactions with guests directly shape perceptions of service quality (Bettencourt et al., 2005; Bitner, 1990; Mattila & Enz, 2002). They are expected to respond to customer requests and resolve problems courteously and

effectively, making their performance critical for both service quality and customer satisfaction (Karatepe, 2013).

Engaged and satisfied employees create a positive feedback loop that benefits both business performance and the overall customer experience (Karatepe, 2013; Farmaki et al., 2022). Engagement reflects the investment of cognitive, emotional, and physical resources into work roles, enabling employees to be vigilant, responsive, and proactive in addressing customer needs (Karatepe, 2013). This highlights the strategic importance of human capital in hospitality, where employee skills, commitment, and service quality are closely tied to organisational outcomes.

Research in hospitality and tourism management has further explored the link between human capital and firm performance, emphasising the role of effective management practices. Initiatives in talent management, targeted training programs, and retention strategies have been shown to foster employee satisfaction and commitment (Madera et al., 2016; Deery & Jago, 2015). These studies demonstrate that investing in employees not only improves operational outcomes but also strengthens the competitive position of hospitality organisations.

Despite this recognition, many firms still struggle to fully leverage employee potential. High turnover, seasonal fluctuations, and recruitment difficulties can lead employees to view the work environment as unstable or unsupportive, which in turn may reduce motivation and engagement. Inadequate training programs, for example, can leave employees feeling unprepared to meet customer needs effectively, negatively affecting confidence, job satisfaction, and overall performance (Karatepe, 2013).

These challenges underscore the need for targeted HR practices and strategic investment in employee development. In particular, approaches tailored to specific employee segments—guided by an understanding of perceptions and attitudes—can align Talent Management initiatives with both organisational objectives and individual motivations. By systematically considering how employees perceive their work, hospitality firms can ensure that human capital contributes to sustained organisational performance and consistently high-quality service delivery.

2.2.3 Talent Management

Talent Management (TM) has become an increasingly prominent topic across management disciplines (Collings et al., 2015) and has gained particular relevance in the hospitality and tourism sector (Kravariti et al., 2021; Liu-lastres et al., 2023), largely due to the customer-facing nature of many hospitality roles. The importance of TM in this industry also stems from the rapidly evolving environment in which hospitality organisations operate, shaped by global and unprecedented challenges such as pandemics (Popa et al., 2023), technological disruptions driven by automation and artificial intelligence (Moldenhauer & Londt, 2019; Morosan & Bowen, 2022), and persistent labour shortages.

Moreover, labour shortages in the hospitality industry are expected to persist over the coming years, due to the structural mismatch between labour supply and demand (Kwok, 2022). In such a context, attracting and retaining talents—especially among younger generations—has become one of the most pressing managerial challenges (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2024). All this leads to the need for a well-designed TM strategy that can help organisations address these shortages by strengthening their employer brand, promoting career development, and building a resilient and motivated workforce (Johnson et al.,

2019).

Despite the growing attention, the concept of TM remains somewhat ambiguous. Lewis and Heckman (2006) observed that definitions vary widely and that confusion persists regarding its goals and boundaries. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2022), the primary objective of TM is to attract, identify, develop, motivate, retain, and deploy employees deemed highly valuable to an organisation, ensuring alignment with its strategic business objectives. When strategically implemented, TM fosters a high-performance culture, supports learning and development, enhances the employer brand, and promotes inclusion and diversity. In this context, “talent” refers not only to employees with exceptional skills or leadership potential but also to those who demonstrate adaptability, customer orientation, and a commitment to professional growth (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2024; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019).

Recent studies emphasise that understanding employees’ perceptions, motivations, and expectations is essential for designing effective TM policies and employer branding strategies (Kapuscinski et al., 2021), based also on applying marketing principles and techniques to HR and TM management. Such an approach enables organisations to move beyond a superficial understanding of what job seekers value and to develop more targeted initiatives that attract and retain diverse talent segments in an increasingly competitive labour market.

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Study settings & research design

The study was conducted in Italy, a country facing increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining hospitality workers. This setting is particularly relevant as Italy is estimated

to need 760,000 workers in tourism and commerce, including hospitality roles, by 2027 (CRILDA, 2024). Recruitment is particularly challenging for positions such as concierge, front-of-house, and kitchen staff (Unioncamere & ANPAL, 2023), further exacerbated by the seasonal nature of many hospitality jobs, which leads to fluctuations in demand and irregular work schedules. The Italian case thus serves as a critical example of the “talent shortage” paradox in a high-vocation tourism destination.

In this study, a quantitative approach was adopted with the purpose of understanding and analysing how Italians perceive hospitality employment. First of all, a questionnaire, presented in Appendix B, was developed based on previous literature on employee perceptions in the hospitality and tourism industry (Magnini et al., 2024; Richardson, 2010; Kwan, 2005). The items were defined based on the findings of the qualitative study presented and discussed in chapter 1 of the present PhD thesis, complemented by items and scales already identified by existing studies carried out in other countries (Magnini et al., 2024; Richardson, 2010; Kwan, 2005). The adequacy of the items was checked through a pilot test conducted with authors’ personal connections, which also helped refine clarity and comprehension of the items. Minor adjustments were made based on feedback to improve wording and avoid ambiguities.

The questionnaire includes closed-ended and Likert-scale questions, and it consists of five sections.

The first section contained screening questions aimed at identifying whether respondents had previous work experience in the hospitality sector and, if so, the total number of years. The second and third sections asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements concerning various aspects of hospitality jobs—such as working conditions, personal growth, social interactions, and perceptions of hospitality companies and managerial practices—using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly

agree). There were also items assessing potential changes in respondents' work attitudes following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fourth section focused on factors influencing job attractiveness. Participants were asked to rate the importance of several job attributes that could appear in hospitality job advertisements, again using a five-point scale (1 = not important at all, 5 = very important).

Finally, the fifth section collected general socio-demographic information (e.g., gender, age, education, employment status, and region of residence).

2.3.2 Data collection

The questionnaire was administered in Italian, the native language of the respondents, to ensure clear comprehension and minimise linguistic bias. It was distributed online via SurveyMonkey, with the survey link initially shared through researchers' personal connections using both e-mail and WhatsApp. These contacts were also encouraged to further disseminate the link, supporting a snowball sampling procedure (Wrenn et al., 2007). The snowball sampling technique was adopted because it is particularly suitable for frequently used sampling technique when the subjects are difficult to locate and access, when the goal is to obtain data from a large sample of individuals residing across different geographical areas (in our case different regions in Italy), and when a data collections need to be carried out to cope with the financial constraints posed by the research project (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Participation was open to individuals aged 18 or older residing in Italy, including both those with and without prior work experience in the hospitality sector. This approach allowed the collection of perceptions from employees with direct hospitality experience as well as from non-employees, providing a comprehensive view of general attitudes toward the sector. Respondents were explicitly instructed to answer based on their own

direct experience if they had worked in the hospitality sector, or based on what they normally heard or observed in their daily life if they had never worked in the sector. To encourage candid responses and protect participant privacy, the questionnaire was anonymous, and all collected data were treated in aggregate form.

Data were collected between July and October 2024. Of the 3,747 responses received, 2,936 were complete and valid for analysis. In cases of minimal missing data, values were replaced with the mean of the corresponding variable (Little & Rubin, 2019).

2.3.3 Data analysis

A factor-cluster analysis was conducted (Hair et al., 2010; Madrigal, 1995) using SPSS. First of all, the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), specifically the principal component analysis (PCA) method, was performed to identify the latent dimensions underlying respondents' perceptions of employment in the hospitality.

Before extracting the factors, the suitability of the dataset for factor analysis was assessed by examining the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy together with Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO index evaluates whether the observed correlations among variables are sufficiently explained by common underlying factors by comparing partial correlations with zero-order correlations; values above 0.80 are generally interpreted as indicating good sampling adequacy and confirming the appropriateness of applying factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity, on the other hand, determines whether the correlation matrix significantly differs from an identity matrix. A statistically significant result ($p < .0001$) indicates that the variables are adequately intercorrelated, supporting the use of factor analysis (i.e., $p\text{-value} < .0001$) (Del Chiappa et al., 2018; Lattin et al., 2003).

The factors identified via EFA served as input variables for a cluster analysis, which aimed to isolate groups of respondents (clusters) who shared similar perceptions and

attitudes toward hospitality employment. Cluster analysis provides evidence that respondents and their opinions are not homogeneous and offers a more nuanced understanding than examining average responses (Pérez & Nadal, 2005).

Finally, chi-square tests were performed to investigate the association between cluster membership and categorical socio-demographic variables, such as gender, age, and employment status. This allowed for the assessment of whether certain respondent characteristics were significantly related to different perception profiles.

2.4 Findings

2.4.1 Sample characteristics

Referring to the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (Table 3), just over half of the respondents were female (59.8%), and the majority were under 35 years old (66.9%). The majority were single (43.1%) and without children (67.2%). In terms of education, most held a high school diploma (58.4%), followed by a middle school diploma (14.7%). Nearly half of the sample was employed (48.1%), while 20.2% were students. Regarding work experience in hospitality, almost half of the participants had previous work experience in the sector (48.1%), whereas only a small percentage was working in the industry at the time of the survey (19.5%).

Table 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

Variables	%		%
Gender		Education	
Female	59.8	Lower secondary school diploma	14.7
Male	29.8	High school diploma	58.4
Prefer not to answer	8.3	Bachelor's degree	13.9
Non-binary	2.1	Master's degree	9.9

Age		Postgraduate diploma/Master's	2.3
18-25	42.8	PhD	0.8
26-35	24.1	Occupational status	
36-45	12.7	Student	20.2
46-55	12.6	Working student	16.3
56-65	6.3	Employed	48.1
≥ 66	1.5	Unemployed	12.0
Civil status		Retired	3.4
Single	43.1	Hospitality experience	
Married	23.8	<i>Current employed</i>	
Living with partner	9.9	Yes	19.5
In a relationship	19.3	No	80.5
Separated or divorced	2.9	<i>Previous experience</i>	
Widowed	1.0	Yes	48.1
Children		No	51.9
None	67.2		
1 child	11.4		
2 children	15.6		
3 or more children	5.8		

2.4.2 Exploratory factor analysis

Prior to performing the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), the suitability of the dataset was evaluated by applying the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy together with Bartlett's test of sphericity (Table 4). The results indicated a KMO value of .96, while Bartlett's test produced a statistically significant outcome ($\chi^2 =$

91,690.98; $p < .0001$). These findings confirmed that the dataset was appropriate for factor analysis.

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure	.96
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	91690.98
df	1378.00
Sig.	.00

Following this, the EFA was conducted to identify the latent dimensions underlying the measured constructs (see Table 5). Five factors emerged, accounting for 55.23% of the total variance., Cronbach's alpha coefficients were subsequently computed to examine the internal reliability of the extracted factors; all values were .70 or higher (except for one slightly below), suggesting that the factors are reliable. However, values above .60 are generally considered acceptable in exploratory research (Hair et al., 2010), confirming the overall reliability of the factors (Table 5).

The first component, which explained 26.77% of the total variance, was named '*Workplace quality & employment conditions*' and reflected respondents' perceptions of the overall quality of the work environment, including aspects such as fair working conditions, support from management, employee benefits, and work-life balance.

The second component, labelled '*Job offer attractiveness*' (explaining 15.69% of the variance), referred to the elements that individuals consider important for making a job advertisement appealing, such as clarity about the role, responsibilities, salary, and working hours.

The third component, '*self-growth & social opportunities*', represented 5.55% of the total variance and captured the extent to which the job is seen as meaningful, offering opportunities for learning and personal growth.

The fourth component, '*Pandemic-driven reprioritisation*', summarised 3.87% of the total variance, and was related to the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals' work-related priorities, particularly regarding wellbeing, free time, and search for a better work-life balance.

The last component was labelled '*Perceived barriers and deterrents*' (3.33% of total variance) and encompassed negatively framed items reflecting both structural limitations and psychological obstacles that discourage individuals from considering hospitality as a viable employment option. In this last component, higher scores reflect a greater perception of such barriers, whereas lower scores indicate that respondents perceive relatively few obstacles to working in the sector. The inclusion of these items was considered essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the constraints and challenges perceived by respondents.

*Table 5. Rotated factor loading matrix (Varimax Rotation)**

	M.	Eigen– value	% of variance	Alpha
F1. Workplace quality & employment conditions		14.189	26.772	.953
C10 – hospitality jobs provide good working conditions	2.90	.655		
C11 – hospitality jobs provide more advantages than disadvantages	3.00	.596		
C18 – hospitality jobs provide good work-life balance	2.39	.709		
D1 – hospitality jobs provide adequate benefits (monetary and non-monetary)	2.69	.73		
D2 – hospitality organisations provide good opportunities to become a manager	2.96	.631		
D3 – hospitality organisations provide good quality staff accommodation	2.46	.743		
D4 – hospitality organisations provide quality staff canteen/meal service	2.73	.669		

D5 – hospitality organisations provide appropriate work shifts/schedules	2.53	.784		
D6 – hospitality organisations provide clear career paths	2.72	.761		
D7 – hospitality organisations provide stable job positions	2.73	.713		
D8 – hospitality organisations provide flexible working hours	2.44	.725		
D9 – reasonable salaries from the start of employment	2.32	.776		
D10 – opportunities for continuous training	2.98	.653		
E1 – managers have good delegation skills	3.07	.536		
E3 – managers treat staff fairly/appropriately	2.94	.671		
E4 – managers reward staff for their work	2.76	.72		
F1 – hotels offer reward systems for employees	2.54	.711		
F2 – hotels invest adequately in classroom-based staff training	2.49	.731		
F3 – hotels invest adequately in on-the-job staff training	2.72	.692		
F5 – the work environment is pleasant	3.06	.595		
F6 – workloads are reasonable	2.62	.743		
F8 – it's considered a prestigious and respectable profession	3.07	.547		
F2. Job offer attractiveness		8.319	15.695	.948
G1 – contract type	4.04	.837		
G2 – salary	4.11	.848		
G3 – working hours	4.06	.849		
G4 – work location	4.03	.801		
G5 – company information (history, size, clientele, identity, philosophy, etc.)	3.64	.677		
G6 – possible benefits and bonuses	3.85	.825		
G7 – organisational role and responsibilities	4.10	.852		
G8 – onboarding/policies for new hires	3.67	.74		
G9 – training opportunities	3.97	.809		

G10 – meal provisions	3.94	.791		
G12 – required experience level	3.84	.66		
G13 – career growth and advancement prospects	4.08	.788		
G14 – sociodemographic profile of the ideal candidate (age, education, etc.)	3.63	.59		
F3. Self-growth & social opportunities			2.942	5.551 .876
C5 – hospitality jobs allow me to use my knowledge and skills	3.69	.704		
C6 – hospitality jobs provide transferable skills for other sectors	3.75	.713		
C7 – hospitality jobs enable continuous learning	3.97	.766		
C8 – hospitality jobs reflect my personality	2.86	.483		
C12 – hospitality jobs provide opportunities for personal growth	3.60	.691		
C13 – hospitality jobs allow creativity	3.19	.582		
C14 – hospitality jobs help develop a broad network of contacts	4.12	.692		
C15 – hospitality jobs allow interaction with people from different cultures	4.35	.668		
F4. Pandemic-driven reprioritisation			2.052	3.872 .868
H1 – the pandemic made me realise the importance of taking care of my physical and mental well-being	3.87	.774		
H2 – the pandemic made me realise the importance of having more free time for myself, my family, and friends	3.98	.832		
H3 – the pandemic made me realise the importance of achieving a good work-life balance	4.19	.788		
F5. Perceived barriers and deterrents			1.768	3.337 .613
C9 – hospitality jobs make me feel like a ‘servant to others’	2.73	.529		
C19 – hospitality jobs negatively affect family life	2.80	.605		
E2 – managers make little effort to ensure staff satisfaction	3.09	.673		

E5 – managers lack adequate skills for their role	2.84	.702
F4 – hospitality jobs are usually seasonal, which I find unappealing	3.23	.493

*The items presented in this table are reduced for spacing purposes. The full list of items is available in Appendix B. As detailed in section 2.3.1, items were developed based on the qualitative findings of Chapter 1 and adapted from established scales (Kwan, 2005; Magnini et al., 2024; Richardson, 2010).

2.4.3 Cluster analysis

The scores derived from the five identified components were subsequently used as a input variables in the cluster analysis, which identified four distinct groups of respondents, each characterised by specific perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality employment: ‘Enthusiasts’(N=981), ‘resistant’ (N=706), ‘moderately interested’ (N=658), and ‘indifferent’ respondents (N=591) (Table 6).

Following a two-step clustering procedure, different solutions (from 2 to 6 clusters) were examined. The four-cluster solution was retained after evaluating both the distribution of cases across clusters and the interpretability of the resulting profiles. This configuration was considered the most appropriate because it produced clusters of relatively balanced and adequate size, thereby ensuring sufficient statistical power for the subsequent analyses. Each cluster showed distinct and significant differences across all identified factors, and the ANOVA test ($p < 0.001$) confirmed the statistical validity of the four-cluster solution (Table 6) (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 6. Clusters’ profile results

Indifferent (N=591)	Moderately interested (N=658)	Resistant (N=706)	Enthusiasts (N=981)	F	Sig.
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F1: Workplace quality & employment conditions	.10848	-.52428	-0.66294	.76341	560.572	0.000
F2: Job offer attractiveness	-.95041	-.56909	.71758	.43786	775.533	0.000
F3: Self-growth & social opportunities	-.51668	.7361	-.84134	.42303	666.125	0.000
F4: Pandemic-driven reprioritisation	-1.02307	.65139	.29077	-.02983	473.837	0.000
F5: Perceived barriers and deterrents	-.05658	.13877	.23227	-.22615	35.484	0.000
C5 – hospitality jobs allow me to use my knowledge and skills	3.19	4.03	2.81	4.39		
C6 – hospitality jobs provide transferable skills for other sectors	3.19	4.14	3.05	4.32		
C7 – hospitality jobs enable continuous learning	3.45	4.39	3.25	4.52		
C8 – hospitality jobs reflect my personality	2.67	2.88	2.00	3.59		
C9 – hospitality jobs make me feel like a ‘servant to others’	2.73	2.83	3.35	2.22		

C10 - hospitality jobs	2.84	2.64	2.09	3.70
provide good working conditions				
C11 – hospitality jobs	2.87	2.92	2.13	3.75
provide more advantages than disadvantages				
C12 – hospitality jobs	3.19	3.92	2.61	4.34
provide opportunities for personal growth				
C13 – hospitality jobs	2.87	3.37	2.21	3.98
allow creativity				
C14 – hospitality jobs	3.39	4.51	3.68	4.62
help develop a broad network of contacts				
C15 – hospitality jobs	3.63	4.71	4.05	4.76
allow interaction with people from different cultures				
C18 – hospitality jobs	2.56	1.93	1.70	3.11
provide good work-life balance				
C19 – hospitality jobs	2.68	2.99	3.08	2.55
negatively affect family life				
D1 – hospitality jobs	2.62	2.45	2.05	3.35
provide adequate				

benefits (monetary and
non-monetary)

D2 – hospitality 2.73 2.83 2.24 3.71

organisations provide
good opportunities to
become a manager

D3 – hospitality 2.54 2.08 1.84 3.12

organisations provide
good quality staff
accommodation

D4 – hospitality 2.66 2.43 2.17 3.39

organisations provide
quality staff
canteen/meal service

D5 – hospitality 2.65 2.06 1.87 3.25

organisations provide
appropriate work
shifts/schedules

D6 – hospitality 2.63 2.39 2.00 3.51

organisations provide
clear career paths

D7 – hospitality 2.65 2.40 2.05 3.47

organisations provide
stable job positions

D8 – hospitality 2.56 1.96 1.85 3.11

organisations provide
flexible working hours

D9 – reasonable salaries from the start of employment	2.48	1.74	1.74	3.02
D10 – opportunities for continuous training	2.71	2.91	2.16	3.77
E1 – managers have good delegation skills	2.70	2.94	2.67	3.66
E2 – managers make little effort to ensure staff satisfaction	2.84	3.19	3.39	2.96
E3 – managers treat staff fairly/appropriately	2.75	2.68	2.48	3.57
E4 – managers reward staff for their work	2.64	2.44	2.20	3.46
E5 – managers lack adequate skills for their role	2.85	2.86	3.03	2.69
F1 – hotel offer reward systems for employees	2.59	2.18	2.01	3.13
F2 – hotels invest adequately in classroom-based staff training	2.50	2.12	1.96	3.10
F3 – hotels invest adequately in on-the-job staff training	2.65	2.41	2.18	3.36

F4 – hospitality jobs are usually seasonal, which I find unappealing	2.93	3.39	3.60	3.05
F5 – the work environment is pleasant	2.90	2.81	2.43	3.76
F6 – workloads are reasonable	2.72	2.15	2.00	3.31
F8 – it’s considered a prestigious and respectable profession	2.78	2.93	2.52	3.74
G1 – contract type	2.95	3.65	4.70	4.48
G2 – salary	2.95	3.71	4.82	4.57
G3 – working hours	2.91	3.56	4.84	4.53
G4 – work location	2.96	3.63	4.67	4.49
G5 – company information (history, size, clientele, identity, philosophy, etc.)	2.84	3.26	3.98	4.13
G6 – possible benefits and bonuses	2.84	3.34	4.47	4.35
G7 – organisational role and responsibilities	3.05	3.68	4.72	4.56
G8 – onboarding/policies for new hires	2.81	3.20	4.23	4.11

G9 – training opportunities	2.93	3.56	4.43	4.52
G10 – meal provisions	2.91	3.52	4.53	4.42
G12 – required experience level	3.01	3.53	4.21	4.28
G13 – career growth and advancement prospects	3.07	3.77	4.57	4.55
G14 – sociodemographic profile of the ideal candidate (age, education, etc.)	2.90	3.35	3.89	4.06
H1 – the pandemic made me realise the importance of taking care of my physical and mental well-being	2.65	4.31	4.27	4.02
H2 – the pandemic made me realise the importance of having more free time for myself, my family, and friends	2.73	4.50	4.41	4.09
H3 – the pandemic made me realise the importance of	2.82	4.66	4.62	4.37

achieving a good work-
life balance

For each cluster, demographic characteristics and respondents' overall perceptions and attitudes toward hospitality employment are presented.

'Enthusiasts', the largest group, included mostly females (61.6%), aged 18-25, with a high school diploma (60%). They expressed a positive view of hospitality jobs as opportunities for growth and social interaction. In particular, they viewed this employment type as a social opportunity to interact with people from different cultures (M=4.76), expand their network (M=4.62), as well as a way to continuously learn new things (M=4.52). Nevertheless, they were more neutral regarding salaries at entry level (M=3.02), work-life balance (M=3.11), and staff accommodation quality (M=3.12). They also considered hospitality a source of continuous training (M=3.77), a pleasant environment (M=3.76), and a prestigious and respectable profession (M=3.74).

'Moderately interested' were mainly female (61.60%), aged 18-25 (39.90%) or 26-35 (26%), with a high school diploma (60.30%). They valued the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures (M=4.71) and build networks (M=4.51). Despite this, they felt that the job does not match their personality (M=2.88) or offer good work- life balance (M=1.93). In line with this, they strongly agreed that the pandemic has changed their priorities, placing more value on physical and mental well-being (M=4.31), free time (M=4.50), and better work-life balance (M=4.66).

'Resistant' respondents were mostly female (63.50%), aged 18-25 (39.30%) or 26-35 (27.30%), with a high-school degree (53.30%) or a bachelor's degree (21.40%). They viewed hospitality work as unappealing due to seasonality (M=3.60), lack of managerial support (M=3.39), and feeling exploited ("feeling like a slave") (M=3.35). They did not

believe the job aligned with their personality (M=2.00) or allowed creativity (M=2.21). Moreover, they emphasised the need for job advertisements to be clearer, especially regarding working hours (M=4.84), salary (M=4.82), and role description (M=4.72).

‘Indifferent’ respondents included both females (50.20%) and males (36.50%), mostly aged 18-25 (56.50%), with a high school diploma (59.90%) or a middle school diploma (17.40%). They expressed a relatively neutral position regarding hospitality employment. They found the working environment somewhat pleasant (M=2.90) but felt salaries are not adequate at the entry level (M=2.48). Their work-related priorities did not seem significantly affected by the pandemic, as shown by their lower agreement with statements related to the importance of taking care of their physical and mental well-being (M=2.65) and having more free time to dedicate to themselves (M=2.73).

2.4.4 Chi-square test

Chi-square analyses (Table 7) revealed statistically significant differences across the identified segments according to gender ($\chi^2=33.573$, $p=.000$), age ($\chi^2=73.047$, $p=0.000$), marital status ($\chi^2=42.232$, $p=0.000$), parental status ($\chi^2=37.447$, $p=0.000$), level of education ($\chi^2=95.814$, $p=0.000$), and current employment status and position in hospitality ($\chi^2=57.04$, $p=0.000$). These results suggest that demographic factors significantly influence individuals’ propensity to work in the hospitality sector. Conversely, no statistically significant association was observed for type of employment contract held in hospitality ($\chi^2=24.388$, $p=0.060$).

Table 7. Demographic characteristics of respondents and results of the χ^2 analysis.

Variables	Chi-square test	sig
Gender	33,573	0,000
Age	73,047	0,000
Marital status	42,232	0,000

Parental status	37,447	0,000
Level of education	95,814	0,000
Current occupation	57,04	0,000
Current position in hospitality	73,073	0,005
Type of employment contract in hospitality	24,388	0,060

2.5 Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to the scientific debate on post-pandemic perceptions of hospitality employment. Through a factor-cluster analysis on a sample of Italians— both with and without experience in the sector— we examined whether individuals could be grouped into segments based on similar perceptions and attitudes toward working in hospitality. The analysis, applied to five factors identified through exploratory factor analysis, revealed that perceptions are far from homogeneous. Four distinct clusters emerged: *enthusiasts*, *moderately interested*, *resistant*, and *indifferent* respondents.

The results indicate that certain segments, particularly the *enthusiasts*, are attracted by the opportunities that working in hospitality offer to them in terms personal development, opportunities for continuous learning, and social interaction with diverse groups of people. Conversely, the *resistant* cluster reflects negative perceptions driven by structural limitations, such as seasonality, low salaries, limited career advancement, and a lack of managerial support. The *moderately-interested* group occupies a middle ground, valuing developmental and social aspects but reporting misalignment with personal preferences and heightened attention to well-being and work-life balance, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the *indifferent* cluster shows relatively neutral perceptions, with little sensitivity to both sectoral opportunities and pandemic-driven reprioritisation, highlighting variability in the impact of external shocks across different groups.

The analysis revealed significant differences between the identified clusters with respect to age, gender, marital status, and educational attainment. No differences were found based on type of contract. This reinforces the importance of considering personal and socio-cultural variables when designing recruitment and retention strategies. In addition, the results align with prior literature indicating that the pandemic has reshaped work-related priorities, especially regarding physical and mental well-being and the pursuit of a better work-life balance (Baum et al., 2020). However, our study also found a subgroup ('indifferent' cluster) that did not perceive any change post-pandemic, indicating that its impact varies across groups.

2.5.1 Theoretical implications

Overall, this study provides theoretical contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence that perceptions and attitudes of hospitality employment are multidimensional and heterogeneous. By adopting an exploratory factor-cluster analysis, the research identifies five key factors— *workplace quality and employment conditions*, *job offer attractiveness*, *self-growth & social opportunities*, *pandemic-driven reprioritisation*, and *perceived barriers and deterrents*—and demonstrates how these factors interact to create distinct segments of potential and current employees. This segmentation approach highlights that the labour market for hospitality jobs cannot be understood as a uniform group, but rather as composed of individuals with varied expectations, motivations, and concerns. Second, the study contributes to post-pandemic research by showing that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced work-related priorities differently across clusters. While some respondents reprioritised well-being, free time, and work-life balance, others (*indifferent* cluster) were largely unaffected. This differential effect underscores the need to consider context-specific external shocks when analysing employment perceptions, extending prior work on workforce adaptability and resilience in hospitality.

Finally, the study makes a contribution to talent management literature by highlighting the heterogeneous nature of employee segments and their differing needs and motivations. Recognising these differences allows organisations to better tailor recruitment, retention, and development strategies to specific groups, thus improving the effectiveness of talent management initiatives in hospitality. Integrating structural, intrinsic, and socio-demographic factors into a single framework also offers a foundation for understanding how organisational policies and work design can influence talent attraction and retention, particularly in the post-pandemic context.

2.5.2 Practical implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for hospitality employers. First, the identification of four distinct clusters—*enthusiasts*, *moderately interested*, *resistant*, and *indifferent* respondents—highlights the need for planning and executing employer branding and recruitment strategies that recognise the nuances of the individuals. Recognising that potential and current employees have different motivations, expectations, and concerns allows organisations to tailor their communication, job offers, and workplace policies to specific segments. In line with Kapuściński (2022), this approach enables hospitality employers to develop branding strategies that extend beyond a superficial focus on job attributes and better address the genuine motivations and expectations of job seekers.

Second, the results can guide the design of jobs and job offers to better align with employees' preferences. This aligns with the findings of Ladkin & Buhalis (2016), who suggest that hospitality organisations should adapt their job postings to attract more applicants. For example, segments motivated by personal growth and social interaction (*enthusiasts*) may respond positively to opportunities for training, career development, and intercultural interaction. Conversely, more resistant groups are influenced by

perceptions of poor working conditions, low salaries, and seasonal instability, suggesting that addressing these structural limitations could increase sector attractiveness. Employers can highlight tangible benefits, clarify job responsibilities, and provide transparent information about career paths to reduce perceived barriers.

Third, the study emphasises the importance of considering work-life balance and well-being, particularly in the post-pandemic context. The moderately interested cluster, for instance, places strong value on flexibility, free time, and health-related benefits. Organisations that implement policies promoting well-being, flexible schedules, and supportive management practices may improve employee satisfaction, retention, and overall employer reputation.

Finally, these insights support effective talent management strategies, enabling hospitality organisations to attract and retain employees in an increasingly competitive labour market. By understanding the heterogeneous perceptions of hospitality work, managers can implement targeted initiatives tailored to the specific characteristics of each cluster, ultimately enhancing organisational performance and reducing turnover.

2.5.3 Limitations and future research

Although some significant results are reported, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the composition of the sample limits the generalisability of the results. The sample included Italian residents, which may reflect culture-specific perceptions of hospitality employment. Future research could replicate this study with larger and more diverse samples, including cross-cultural comparisons, to explore potential differences across countries, cultural contexts, or sectors beyond hospitality. In particular, examining the perceptions and attitudes of foreign workers in Italy's hospitality sector could provide valuable insights into how international employees experience and evaluate these jobs.

Second, the research did not include psychological variables, such as personality traits or social influences, which may significantly affect individuals' perceptions of and attitudes toward a career in hospitality. Future research should incorporate these variables to achieve a more complete picture of the drivers behind career perceptions.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the research captures participants' views at a single moment in time, making it difficult to capture how attitudes may evolve, particularly in light of post-pandemic changes in the sector. Despite these limitations, the findings provide a solid basis for further investigation into the factors influencing perceptions of hospitality employment. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to examine how attitudes and perceptions evolve over time and to determine the extent to which changes in the industry influence individuals' career preferences.

Chapter 3

Understanding employee retention in hospitality:

Insights from a means-end chain approach

Understanding employee retention in hospitality:

Insights from a means-end chain approach

The hospitality industry faces persistent challenges in attracting and retaining employees, largely due to high turnover, seasonality, and demanding working conditions. Understanding what encourages workers to stay in the sector is critical to addressing this crisis. By adopting an employee-centric approach, this study explores the factors that influence staff retention in the hospitality sector, drawing on the experiences of individuals with professional backgrounds in hospitality businesses. Using 28 in-depth interviews and applying the laddering technique within the frameworks of Means-End Chain Theory (MEC) and Employer Branding (EB), this research investigates how employees link concrete job attributes to broader outcomes and personal values. The findings reveal that core job characteristics—such as fair pay, supportive leadership, opportunities for professional development, and work-life balance—play a key role in fostering employees' sense of stability, fulfilment, and well-being. These elements strengthen their intention to stay in the sector. By uncovering the underlying mechanisms behind employees' attachment to their work, this study provides valuable insights for hospitality managers seeking to reduce turnover and develop more resilient workforce strategies.

Keywords: employee retention; Means-End Chain theory; hospitality industry; Employer Branding

3.1 Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry represents a significant driver of the global economy, contributing over 10% to global GDP and supporting approximately 350 million jobs worldwide, with projections indicating further growth of the sector in the coming years (WTTC, 2025). The hospitality sector plays a central role in the broader tourism industry, employing four out of five individuals working in tourism-related activities (Eurostat, 2022). Despite its relevance, the hospitality sector has long faced persistent human

resource challenges, particularly in attracting and retaining employees within an increasingly competitive labour market. These challenges include persistent staff shortages, high turnover rates, and a worsening image of hospitality jobs (Dogru et al., 2023; Kwok, 2022; Liu-Lastres et al., 2022; Kapuściński et al., 2022; King et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these issues, pushing many workers to seek jobs in other sectors and creating uncertainty about returning to hospitality (Baum et al., 2020; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). Early layoffs and business closures caused unprecedented job losses, followed by a surge in vacancies once restrictions eased (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). Despite more job postings, many former employees were reluctant to return, with 25–33% reportedly unwilling to re-enter the sector (Chen & Rui, 2022). Reasons include low pay, long hours, inflexible schedules, physically demanding tasks, health concerns, and the desire for new career paths; many found more stable work elsewhere, and the hospitality talent shortage remains ongoing (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023).

Several investigations have examined the antecedents and the consequences of employee turnover in hospitality—both before and after the pandemic (Afsar et al., 2018; Nguyen *et al.*, 2023; Chen & Rui, 2022; Bajrami et al., 2021; Park & Min, 2020). Scholars have emphasised the substantial costs associated with turnover, including continuous recruitment and training requirements (Afsar et al., 2018), as well as its detrimental impact on the motivation, engagement, and commitment of remaining employees, ultimately undermining organisational performance and productivity (Park & Min, 2020). As such, employee retention has become one of the most pressing challenges for hospitality organisations (Kravariti et al., 2021).

In response to these workforce challenges, Employer Branding (EB) has emerged as a strategic approach for improving attraction and retention (Azhar et al., 2024). However, prior researchers have primarily focused on employer attractiveness and the perceptions

of potential employees (Bharadwaj et al., 2021; Ronda et al., 2018), thus analysing employer branding from an external perspective (students, job seekers). In contrast, knowledge on how current employees perceive the employer brand (i.e., internal perspective) and the factors that drive their decision to stay (Ahmed et al., 2022) remains relatively underexplored. This study was therefore carried out to further deepen our scientific understanding around this somewhat overlooked research area. Specifically, it aims to explore the internal dimension of employer branding by uncovering the cognitive structures through which hospitality employees perceive and value their work environment. To achieve this, the study applies the Means-End Chain (MEC) theory as a framework to examine how hospitality employees interpret job attributes, and how, in turn, these attributes are associated with perceived benefits and personal values that form the basis of their commitment to the industry. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What job attributes are important for employees when discussing their experiences of working in the hospitality industry, and why?

RQ2. How do these attributes link to perceived benefits and personal values that underpin the employee value proposition and the decision to stay?

The findings of this study advance the theoretical understanding of employee retention research in hospitality by extending the methodological application of MEC in organisational settings. In addition, the results offer practical guidance for hospitality managers seeking to reduce turnover and enhance long-term employee retention. More specifically, the proposed framework enables organisations to design employee value propositions that align with the benefits and underlying values employees associate with their work, thereby supporting more effective talent retention strategies.

3.2 Literature review

3.2.1 *Turnover in hospitality*

Employee turnover, commonly defined as the phenomenon of employees leaving an organisation and being replaced by new employees in a short period of time, represents a critical challenge for organisations worldwide, including those in hospitality (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Croes et al., 2025). Employees may leave voluntarily, often in pursuit of better job opportunities, or involuntarily due to poor working conditions, dissatisfaction, or unfair labour practices (Li et al., 2016).

In particular, the hospitality industry now experiences some of the highest turnover rates in the labour market (Dogru et al., 2023). Many hospitality workers left the industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and transitioned to other sectors (Baum et al., 2020; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023), viewing their skills as transferable and seeking better working conditions (McGinley et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, the hospitality sector recorded the largest number of resignations in the U.S. labour market at the end of 2021 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Many former employees have been reluctant to return due to low pay, long working hours, inflexible schedules, physically demanding tasks, and COVID-19 related concerns, including health risks and vaccination requirements (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Chen and Rui, 2022). As a result, organisations have faced increasing difficulties in attracting former employees back to the sector. This challenge has been further exacerbated during the post-pandemic recovery, as the crisis prompted many individuals to reconsider their lifestyles and place greater emphasis on personal well-being (Jiang and Wen, 2020). Consequently, following the record-high resignations at the end of 2021, the U.S. hospitality sector continued to experience elevated quit rates

compared to other industries throughout 2022 and 2023 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Given the critical relevance of turnover in the hospitality sector, academic research has traditionally focused on investigating the possible antecedents of turnover intention, especially among frontline employees (Chen and Qi, 2022; Park & Min, 2020). Much of this literature attributes turnover either to the structural characteristics of the hospitality sector—such as high customer demands, irregular shifts, job insecurity, low pay, and exposure to harassment (Hoang et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2021)—or to employees' perceptions and attitudes toward their jobs and organisations (Park & Min, 2020). More recently, broader shifts in worker expectations and personal priorities have emerged (King et al., 2021). For new generations of employees, there is greater emphasis on meaningful work, how they perform it, and achieving the self “flow” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Employees increasingly value opportunities for individual growth, skill development, flexibility, having a voice in the workplace, and more frequent informal feedback with their supervisors (Schleicher & Baumann, 2020). In this context, particularly younger generations have shown growing signs of disengagement, becoming more prone to “quiet quitting” and ultimately deciding to change career paths (Hamouche et al., 2023).

High staff turnover imposes substantial costs, not only financial, due to increased recruitment and training expenses, but also strategic expenses. The loss of experienced personnel diminishes service quality and erodes organisational knowledge, potentially giving an advantage to competitors (Afsar et al., 2018). In the hospitality sector, where service delivery heavily depends on employee-customer interaction (Lin & Lin, 2011), the consequences of turnover are particularly pronounced. Recent research has shown that high turnover reduces customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately damaging

organisational reputation (Dogru et al., 2023). Moreover, turnover may negatively affect the motivation, engagement, and commitment of remaining employees, while also decreasing their overall organisational performance and productivity (Park & Min, 2020).

3.2.2 Staff retention

While employee retention has emerged as a prominent subject within the field of organisational psychology (Coetzee et al., 2018), traditional strategies (e.g. improving job conditions or offering financial incentives) have already been applied on employees to reduce turnover, but mainly in a transactional way. Recent literature calls for more holistic, employee-centred approaches that incorporate employees' personal needs and well-being (Croes et al., 2025). This shift underlined the importance of tailored retention strategies that address diverse employee needs (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). Employee retention is not only a driver of operational continuity but also an essential component of an organisation's reputation and long-term sustainability (Vasquez, 2014; Redondo et al., 2019). Azhar et al. (2024) argue that organisations experiencing retention difficulties and consequently high employee turnover are likely to face several negative outcomes, including weakened service delivery, reputational damage, and deterioration of brand image. In addition, such conditions can adversely affect organisational performance by reducing overall productivity.

Within the tourism and hospitality sectors, the study by Ek Styvén et al. (2022) found that employees view their jobs as creative, and the possibility of expressing creativity and engaging in innovative activities was identified as an important determinant of their intention to remain with their current employer. Beyond these studies, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the factors that actively promote employee retention (Yam et al., 2018; Ek Styvén et al., 2022). As Yu et al. (2019) argue, shifting the focus from turnover to retention is advantageous because it provides a more actionable approach by

highlighting the elements that positively characterise employees' satisfaction with hospitality workplaces and related decisions to stay. This is particularly important in hospitality, where retaining experienced personnel constitutes a strategic asset crucial to achieving organisational goals and maintaining competitive advantage (Arasli et al., 2020).

Despite increasing attention to these themes, the academic literature still lacks robust frameworks to explain specific factors that are important for employees' retention in the hospitality industry. In particular, limited attention has been paid to understanding how employees' needs, expectations, and personal values are evolving, and how these factors influence their perceptions of employer attractiveness and their intention to remain in the hospitality industry (Dassler et al., 2022). This points to an urgent need for research that explores effective strategies for retaining talent and understanding the deeper motivations behind employees' employment decisions (Kwok, 2022).

3.2.3 Employer Branding

Employer Branding (EB) is considered a long-term strategy that has been introduced from the marketing discipline into the realm of human resource management. It has been defined as the “differentiation of a firm's characteristics as an employer from those of its competitors” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 502). EB is particularly relevant in service-oriented industries, such as hospitality, where employees play a crucial role in shaping customer experiences. Staff satisfaction influences service quality and, consequently, customer satisfaction and value creation (Bitner, 1990). In hospitality, where talent competition is fierce and turnover is high, companies particularly struggle with employer branding (Gehrels, 2019). A compelling employer brand can support both attraction and, importantly, retention of skilled employees.

The primary goal of EB is to increase job satisfaction among current employees while making the organisation attractive to potential talent (Cable & Turban, 2001). Literature distinguishes two dimensions of EB: external employer branding, which targets prospective employees, and internal employer branding, which refers to current employees (Ahmed et al., 2022). As such, successful employer brands not only facilitate more effective talent attraction but also reduce recruitment costs and increase retention (Berthon et al., 2005).

Previous studies have explored the dimensions of employer branding in specific sectors, such as healthcare (Berry & Martin, 2018; Salameh et al., 2022), banking (Khan et al., 2021), and hospitality, particularly in hotels (Azhar et al., 2024; Bharadwaj et al., 2021). For instance, Azhar et al. (2024) found that EB dimensions (e.g., work-life balance, training and development, and compensation) positively impact organisational performance. Their findings highlight that employer branding supports employee retention, organisational commitment, and overall performance outcomes (Azhar et al., 2024; Bharadwaj et al., 2021).

However, much of the literature focuses on organisational image and attractiveness to outsiders, paying less attention to how current employees perceive and derive value from employer attributes (Edwards, 2010; Bharadwaj et al., 2021). Ronda et al. (2020) stress that understanding employees' decision-making processes requires going beyond employer attributes alone, emphasising the perceived benefits and deeper value dimensions associated with these attributes. As such, the concept of an employee value proposition captures the overall benefits and values an organisation provides in exchange for employees' services (Edwards, 2010).

3.2.4 Means-end chain theory

Given the increasing challenges related to employee retention in the hospitality sector, there is a growing need for theoretical frameworks that can deepen our understanding of the underlying motivations driving employees to remain within the industry. One such framework is the Means-End Chain (MEC) theory, originally developed in the field of consumer behaviour to explain how individuals link product attributes to personal values through perceived benefits (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

This theoretical framework posits that individuals make choices based on a cognitive hierarchy, wherein concrete attributes (means) are connected to more abstract consequences and, ultimately, to core personal values (ends). Measuring these chains follows a sequential three-stage process (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988, p.1). The first stage involves identifying the attributes considered most relevant by individuals. The second consists of conducting in-depth laddering interviews to explore how these attributes are linked to perceived benefits and underlying values. The final stage entails the development of Hierarchical Value Maps (HVMs), which illustrate the network of associations among attributes, consequences, and values expressed in the ladders.

The laddering approach is a tool that has frequently employed in the literature to analyse consumers' means-end chains (MEC) (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988, Lee et al., 2010). Laddering refers to “an in-depth, one-on-one interviewing technique used to develop an understanding of how consumers translate the attributes of products into meaningful associations with respect to self”, in other words along the means-end chain (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988, p.12). In the laddering technique, respondents are asked to reply to a series of “why?” questions: for example, “Why is that attribute (or consequence) important to you?”. Through this iterative questioning process, hierarchical value chains are constructed, illustrating the relationships between concrete attributes, more abstract

consequences, and ultimately the most abstract level of personal values (Ha & Jang, 2013).

Originally developed to understand consumer purchase behaviour (Gutman, 1982), MEC explores how individuals link specific attributes to consequences and ultimately to their personal values. In recent years, it has been applied in the context of employer branding, mainly to explore what makes an employer attractive from the perspective of prospective employees (Ronda et al., 2020; Kapuściński et al., 2022). However, its potential to explain why current employees stay in a sector remains underexplored.

Over time, the application of MEC has expanded beyond consumer behaviour to explore decision-making in business research (Inoue et al., 2017) and organisational research (Bourne and Jenkins, 2005; Ronda et al., 2018). Recent applications of MEC have focused on what makes employers attractive to potential candidates, particularly from younger generations by adopting a branding approach to employers (Kapuściński et al., 2022; Ronda et al., 2020). Notably, both Ronda et al. (2020) and Kapuściński et al. (2022) developed hierarchical value models to explain employer attractiveness. The former focused on interviews with undergraduate business and management students at a top-tier European university, targeting millennial first-job applicants. The latter examined the motivational structures guiding employer choice among Generation Z job seekers, specifically undergraduate and master's students in hospitality management at a UK university. However, its potential to explain employee retention—that is, values attached by current employees to staying within an organisation or industry—remains underexplored. As Kilwinger and van Dam (2021) highlight, the core purpose of MEC remains consistent across applications: to uncover the implicit knowledge and personal motivations that guide individuals' choices. In this sense, applying the MEC framework

to employee retention can reveal how job attributes connect to outcomes and values that influence an employee's decision to remain within an organisation.

In particular, when applied to the context of employee retention, MEC enables the identification of employer attributes that matter most to employees, the benefits they associate with those attributes, and the deeper values that drive their decisions (Kapuściński et al., 2022). In doing so, it offers a value-based and employee-centred perspective that complements more traditional models such as Employer Branding, and helps explain not just what hospitality employees want, but why it matters to them.

3.3 Methodology

The research adopted an exploratory qualitative research to provide a comprehensive and realistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, utilising individual interviews as the principal source of data collection. The interview protocol (presented in Appendix C) was developed based on existing literature concerning the laddering technique, specifically soft laddering (Reynolds & Phillips, 2008). The laddering method was selected because it enables to identify the hierarchical relationships among attributes, consequences, and values (ACV), which form the basis of the means-end-chain theory (Gutman, 1982). This technique has been widely used to explore the underlying motivations influencing consumer decision-making processes (Phillips & Reynolds, 2009), as well as within organisational research to investigate constructs such as employer attractiveness (Ronda et al., 2020; Kapuściński et al., 2022).

Based on Ronda *et al.* (2020)'s study, and adapting it from an employee retention (rather than attraction) perspective, Table 8 summarises the main stages of the laddering technique adopted in this research.

Table 8. Stages of the laddering technique

Stage	Aim/Objective	Step	Description
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1. Data collection	Identify attributes, consequences, and values	1	Elicitation of positive attributes of current employer
		2	Ladder-building “why is this important to you?”
2. Data interpretation	Identify hierarchical structures and linkages among attributes, consequences, and values	3	Aggregation of results and depiction of ladders
		4	Interpretation and labelling of higher value sought related to satisfaction/retention

(adapted from Ronda et al., 2020)

The current study employed the soft laddering technique (Grunert & Grunert, 1995) to identify individual means-end chains, using the constructs previously elicited as the initial attributes for the analysis. Soft laddering is considered particularly appropriate for exploratory qualitative research involving small samples (fewer than 50 participants), as it facilitates an in-depth investigation of participants’ underlying cognitive structures (Costa et al., 2004).

3.3.1 Data collection

Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with individuals having experience in the hospitality sector (being current workers and/or having worked in the sector in the past). This number is consistent with the standards established for qualitative research (Saunders and Townsend, 2016), with Reynolds and Olson (2001) proposing a minimum of 20 to 25 laddering interviews to guarantee data validity. The interviews allow to reach data saturation, that is the point when recurring patterns emerged and no new information was forthcoming (Patton, 2015; Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

The interviews commenced with a brief introduction, during which participants were reassured that there were no correct or incorrect responses. Participants were first asked to name: (1) a hospitality company they had worked for in the past or were currently working for; (2) one they perceived as a positive workplace; and (3) one they perceived as a negative workplace. They were then invited to compare the attributes of these

“positive” and “negative” workplaces and relate them to their own work experiences. Subsequently, participants identified 5-6 key attributes they associated with an ideal workplace in the hospitality sector. For each attribute, the interviewer probed in depth through a series of “Why” questions to explore the connections between job attributes, perceived outcomes, and underlying personal values. This process was repeated until no further elaboration could be provided by participants. Hence, the inquiry focused on the consequences (benefits) of these attributes and the end values individuals are aiming to achieve. Through this process, the interviews uncovered the deep motivations and values underlying perceptions of desirable workplaces—factors that influence individuals’ intentions to stay in or exit the hospitality industry.

Credibility, transferability, and dependability were achieved by adopting different strategies. Credibility was ensured by asking follow-up questions whenever the researcher sought clarification or a more complete understanding of participants’ responses. Transferability was ensured by describing the research process in detail, while dependability was achieved by providing information about data collection and data analysis (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020; Pung et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2022).

The interviews were conducted between August 2023 and April 2024. As Italian was the participants’ native language, all interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim in Italian. The interviews averaged 36 minutes and 10 seconds in length, yielding a verbatim of 76,778 words.

3.3.2 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted following the procedures established by Reynolds and Gutman (1988) for laddering, with the assistance of Ladderux software to enhance validity. First, the transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis to identify emerging and recurring patterns in participants’ answers. The data were then coded to identify

keywords and phrases related to the means-end chain. In the second phase, similar codes were aggregated and sorted into broader ladders (Tuunanen et al., 2022). Only items and themes with a minimum of two concurrences were retained in the analysis (*cut-off level*) (Pung et al., 2026).

The analysis and the construction of the means-end chains focused solely on positive factors related to employee retention, as the study aimed to understand the experiences and values of employees remaining in the hospitality sector.

The identified attributes, consequences, and values were combined to create a Hierarchical Value Map (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988), which illustrates the significance of specific attributes and higher-level values (Reynolds & Phillips, 2008). An implication matrix (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) summarised the relationships between elements and quantified the frequency of direct and indirect links, thus enabling comprehensive conclusions.

3.4 Results

Table 9 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The research involved 28 participants with experience in the hospitality industry, most of whom were female. The majority of respondents were under the age of 35, with the most represented age groups being 18-25 and 26-30 years old. Many participants were single and without children. Educational backgrounds varied. Most of them had completed secondary education or held a bachelor's degree, while a smaller number had completed lower secondary school or obtained a master's degree. Participants reported varying levels of experience in the hospitality industry, with the largest groups having either a few years of experience or a moderate amount, and a smaller number reporting over 20 years in the sector. Some participants also had family members working in the hospitality industry.

Table 9. Interviewees' characteristics.

Characteristics		Number of participants
Gender	Female	21
	Male	7
Age	21-25	9
	26-30	9
	31-35	3
	36-40	3
	41-50	3
	51+	1
Hospitality experience (years)	0-2	7
	3-5	6
	6-10	6
	11-20	5
	21+	3
Education	Middle school diploma	3
	Diploma	11
	Bachelor's degree	11
	Master's degree	3

Building on the means and chain theory, the analysis of the interviews revealed 13 attributes, 13 benefits, and 6 values. Table 10 highlights 13 constructs representing the main categories of attributes that participants used to describe their definition of a meaningful work experience in the hospitality industry.

Table 10. Identified attributes, consequences, and values.

Code	Attributes	Mentions
A1	Pleasant environment	11
A2	Fair compensation	16
A3	Balance work conditions	11
A4	Workplace location	2
A5	Employee benefits	6
A6	Supportive management	15
A7	International environment	3
A8	Career opportunities	12
A9	Innovative environment	4

A10	Effective team	9
A11	Efficient management structure	15
A12	Fair contract terms	7
A13	Reasonable working hours	2
Code	Consequences	Mentions
C14	Improved coordination	6
C15	Financial stability	10
C16	Operational efficiency	14
C17	Role clarity	4
C18	Reduce workplace tensions	12
C19	Feeling valued and supported	20
C20	Decrease work-related stress	14
C21	Cohesion	11
C22	Personal growth	3
C23	Motivation and commitment	25
C24	Health and energy	5
C25	Work-life balance	11
C26	Professional growth	3
Code	Values	Mentions
V27	Security	15
V28	Happiness	20
V29	Well-being	22
V30	Belongingness	6
V31	Sense of fulfilment	18
V32	Fairness	11

In particular, when describing job **attributes**, employees highlighted several elements that define their work experience in the hospitality industry. They emphasised above all the importance of having *fair compensation* (A2), referring to remuneration that adequately reflects workload and working hours. *Supportive management* (A6) was also a recurring attribute, described as supervisors who guide, communicate effectively, and show understanding toward their teams. Among other attributes mentioned by the

interviewees, an *efficient management structure* (A11) was associated with clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and organisational processes.

Career opportunities (A8) emerged as another relevant attribute, referring to the possibility of growth within the company, access to training, and the perception of an evolving career path. *Pleasant environment* (A1) and *balanced work conditions* (A3) were also recurrent, the former describing harmonious and comfortable workplaces and the latter referring to conditions that enable employees to better balance their professional and personal responsibilities.

Among other attributes mentioned, an *effective team* (A10) was associated with trust, collaboration, and mutual support among colleagues, while *fair contract terms* (A12) referred to transparent agreements and well-defined conditions. Some participants also referred to *employee benefits* (A5), such as meals, accommodation, or small perks provided by the company. Less frequently mentioned, but still relevant, were *innovative environments* (A9), where creativity and new ideas are encouraged, and *international contexts* (A7), which provide exposure to different cultures and languages. Finally, *workplace location* (A4) and *reasonable working hours* (A13) were cited as practical aspects that can influence satisfaction, though they appeared less central in participants' narratives.

When describing the **consequences** associated with job attributes, employees referred to a wide range of outcomes shaping their overall work experience in the hospitality industry. As most recurring consequences, the analysis highlighted *motivation and commitment* (C23), which reflected employees' willingness to perform well, remain engaged, and stay loyal to their organisations. Closely related, *feeling valued and supported* (C19) emerged as another recurrent theme, describing situations where participants felt recognised by managers and colleagues and appreciated for their

contribution. *Reduced work-related stress* (C20) was also widely discussed, often linked to supportive environments and well-organised teams that ease daily operations.

Operational efficiency (C16) and *improved coordination* (C14) were described as tangible outcomes of good management and teamwork, resulting in smoother workflows and effective communication across departments. *Reduced workplace tensions* (C18) was also mentioned frequently, referring to a more positive and cooperative atmosphere within teams. Several participants highlighted *cohesion* (C21) as an outcome of such dynamics, describing a sense of unity and belonging that strengthens interpersonal relationships.

Employees also referred to *work-life balance* (C25) as a key consequence of fair and well-organised working conditions, allowing them to maintain personal well-being alongside professional responsibilities. *Financial stability* (C15) was described as a practical result of consistent employment and adequate compensation, while *health and energy* (C24) captured both physical and mental well-being derived from less stressful working environments. Lastly, *role clarity* (C17) and opportunities for *personal* (C22) and *professional growth* (C26) were mentioned as contributing to a clearer sense of direction and long-term development in hospitality careers, even if less frequently than other consequences.

When describing the **values** underlying their work experience, employees referred to a set of personal and professional principles that give meaning to their decision to remain in the hospitality industry. *Well-being* (V29) emerged as the most frequently mentioned value, encompassing both physical and psychological balance, as well as a general sense of satisfaction derived from enjoyable and sustainable working conditions. Closely related, *happiness* (V28) was described as a feeling of positivity and contentment associated with harmonious environments, supportive teams, and meaningful daily

interactions.

Sense of fulfilment (V31) was another recurrent theme, representing the perception of doing work that feels rewarding and purposeful. Employees often described this value in terms of achieving personal goals, helping others, and contributing to the success of the organisation. *Security* (V27) was mentioned as a condition of stability and predictability, referring not only to financial safety but also to the reassurance of being part of a solid workplace.

Among other values identified, *fairness* (V32) captured employees' desire for equity and justice in professional relationships, management decisions, and reward systems. Finally, *belongingness* (V30) reflected the value of being part of a cohesive community, where individuals feel included, recognised, and connected to their colleagues and workplace culture.

Following the coding phase, the hierarchical value map (Figure 1) visually represents the relationships identified among attributes, consequences, and values, showing how they are cognitively connected in the perceptions of employees. For example, among the benefits identified, *motivation and commitment* emerged as particularly salient across multiple ladders. This benefit derives directly from attributes such as *innovative environment* and *career opportunities*, and indirectly from *fair compensation*, *efficient management structures*, and *supportive management*. In the latter case, the relationship is mediated by the intermediate benefit *feeling valued and supported*. Altogether, these chains converge on the core values of *sense of fulfilment* and *happiness*.

Complementing this, the implication matrix (Table 11) provides a detailed overview of these relationships, enabling a deeper understanding of how specific attributes lead to particular benefits and how these benefits, in turn, are associated with underlying

employee values. This analytical tool is particularly useful because it quantifies the number of direct and indirect links between elements, thus highlighting the strength and structure of the connections identified through the laddering analysis (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). For instance, the implication matrix shows the linkage between A2 (Fair compensation) and C19 (Feeling valued and supported), represented by the value 6|1. This notation indicates six direct connections between the attribute and the benefit, and one indirect connection, meaning that in one case the relationship is mediated by an intermediate element.

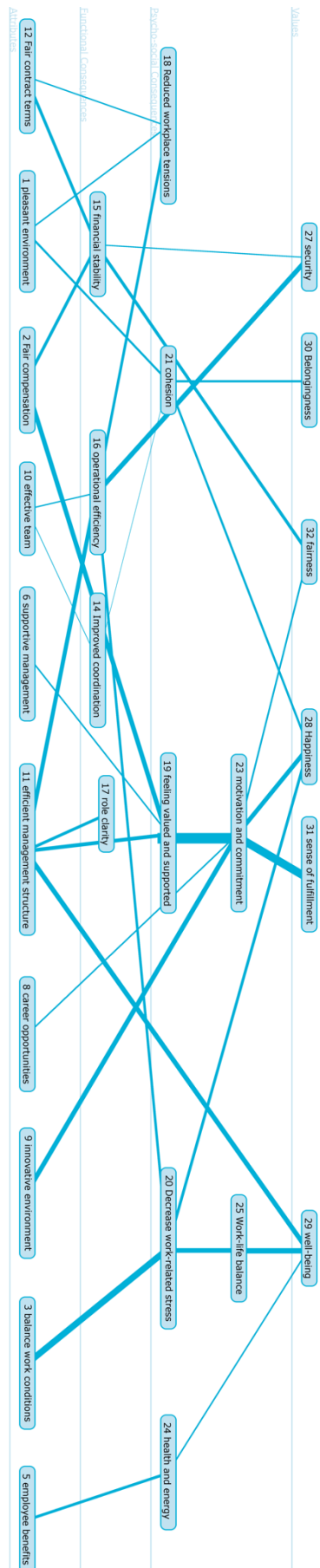


Figure 1. Hierarchical Value Map

Table 11. Implication Matrix.

	C14	C15	C16	C17	C18	C19	C20	C21	C22	C23	C24	C25	C26	V27	V28	V29	V30	V31	V32
A1	1 0			1 0	2 1			4 1		1 1					1 6		0 3		
A2		4 0			0 1	6 1	1 1			4 0				0 3	0 3			0 2	0 4
A3					1 0		3 1			0 1	0 1	6 2		1 0	0 1	0 7			
A4							2 0									0 2			
A5			0 1			1 1				1 0	3 0	0 1		0 1	0 1	0 5			
A6	1 0		1 0		1 1	2 1	1 0	0 1		5 1	1 0			0 2		1 1	0 1	1 3	0 4
A7									1 0									1 1	
A8						1 1			1 1	5 1			2 0					2 4	0 1
A9							1 0	1 0	0 1	0 3					0 2			0 1	
A10	4 0		3 1			0 1	0 1	1 2		1 0			0 1	0 1	0 2	0 2	0 2		
A11		1 0	5 3	3 0	2 1	1 3	0 3			0 3		0 1		0 2	1 2	0 3		0 4	0 2
A12		5 0			3 1	0 1		1 0		1 0				1 3	0 1	0 2			0 1
A13												2 0		0 1		0 1			
C14			1 0			0 1	0 1	3 0						0 1	0 2	1 1			
C15			1 0			1 0	1 0			0 1				5 1		1 0			1 2
C16				1 0	3 0	2 0	3 0			1 0	1 0		1 0	0 3	1 1	1 1		0 1	1 1
C17					0 1	1 0	1 0			1 0					0 1			0 2	0 1
C18								1 0		2 0				1 0	1 0	1 1		0 1	1 1
C19								1 0		5 0		1 0		1 1	4 1	0 1		6 0	3 0
C20										1 0	1 0	3 0		1 0	1 2	4 2		2 0	1 0
C21														1 0	6 1	1 0	1 2		
C22										1 0								2 0	
C23												1 0	1 0	1 0	4 1	1 0	2 0	3 3	4 0
C24															1 0	3 1			
C25														2 0		7 2			
C26														1 0				0 1	

3.5 Discussions and conclusions

The present study contributes to the debate on understanding employee retention in the hospitality industry by adopting an employee-centred perspective. Through qualitative interviews with 28 hospitality employees in Italy, the study applied the Means-End Chain (MEC) theory (Gutman, 1982) within the context of Employer Branding. This framework allowed for the identification of hierarchical cognitive structures linking employer attributes, work-related benefits (or consequences), and underlying personal values as perceived by employees.

Studies exploring values associated with employer choices are still limited (Kapuscinski et al., 2022; Ronda et al., 2020), and, to our knowledge, none has specifically addressed the context of retention. While most research on hospitality employees focuses on attraction, this study concentrated on retention, providing insights into what constitutes an ideal or preferred employer for individuals already working in hospitality.

The findings reveal that a limited set of values emerged as particularly important to employees, with well-being and happiness being the most salient values identified in the analysis. Correspondingly, specific job attributes such as supportive management, fair compensation, and efficient organisational structures serve as ‘channels’ through which employees experience these values, fostering feelings of being valued and fulfilled, and strengthening their attachment to both the organisation and the industry.

The study also confirms the multidirectional nature of relationships between attributes, benefits, and values. In line with the broader consumer behaviour research (Wu et al., 2020) and prior employee-focused studies (Kapuscinski et al., 2022; Ronda et al., 2020), MEC theory demonstrates that a single attribute can generate multiple benefits, while a

single benefit may be achieved through several attributes. For example, the benefit ‘Feeling valued and supported’ emerged from both ‘Fair compensation’ and ‘Efficient management structure.’

Moreover, the results also support previous evidence suggesting that psychological value structures, including happiness and well-being, are particularly salient for employees navigating evolving employment conditions in the post-pandemic hospitality sector (Kapuscinski et al., 2022). They also highlight a shift in value emphasis between job seekers and current employees. Whereas Kapuscinski et al. (2022) found ‘achievement’ and ‘self-fulfilment’ as important for attraction, achievement was largely absent in employees’ narratives in this study. Instead, ‘motivation and commitment’ were closely linked to ‘happiness’ and a ‘sense of fulfilment’, suggesting that in the retention context, employees’ values focus more on emotional well-being, workplace harmony, and relational meaning than on performance or advancement.

3.5.1 Theoretical contributions

The study offers several theoretical contributions to the existing literature on employee retention within the hospitality industry. First, it extends the application of MEC theory—traditionally used in consumer behaviour research and, more recently, in employer branding studies to understand job seekers’ attraction—to examine retention in the hospitality industry. By mapping hierarchical links between job attributes, perceived benefits, and underlying personal values, the study reveals how employees cognitively interpret their work environment to support their decision to remain in the sector. Notably, the findings show the multidirectional nature of these relationships: a single job attribute can generate multiple benefits, while a single benefit can be associated with several attributes (Kapuscinski et al., 2022; Ronda et al., 2020).

Second, the study contributes to the Employer Branding literature by emphasising that attributes valued by current employees should not be considered only as instruments of attraction. Instead, they can be strategically leveraged to design an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) that aligns with employees' intrinsic needs and values, fostering engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Key values identified in this study include well-being, happiness, and a sense of fulfilment, demonstrating that retention is strongly linked to employees' perception of meaningful work and supportive work environments. Attributes such as supportive management, efficient organisational structures, and effective teamwork strengthen social connections and perceived compatibility within the workplace, illustrating that relational and organisational embeddedness are key drivers of retention.

3.5.2 Practical contributions

The results of this study deepen insight into how employees' values, which motivate decision-making, are associated with specific job attributes and perceived benefits in hospitality. Understanding these linkages and the combinations of attributes, consequences, and values helps organisations to more effectively manage the job experience design and to plan and execute effective targeted and customised marketing strategies (Kim et al., 2022), aiming to enhance employee retention in hospitality.

By adopting this perspective, employers can move beyond a superficial view of desirable attributes and understand how these are interpreted by employees to generate meaningful benefits and reinforce core values. Such insights can inform the development of Employee Value Propositions (EVPs) that truly align with employees' intrinsic

motivations and the organisation's strategic resources (Kapuscinski et al., 2022; Ronda et al., 2020).

Consistently providing (or improving) the attributes highlighted in this study—such as supportive management, fair compensation, career development opportunities, and efficient organisational structures—helps fulfil employees' personal values, fostering engagement and encouraging them to remain in their roles. Practical initiatives could include fostering a positive and inclusive work environment, offering recognition and support, providing opportunities for personal and professional growth, promoting flexible and balanced work schedules, and encouraging innovative projects or team-based activities. By focusing on these aspects, hospitality managers can strengthen employees' sense of value and commitment, ultimately supporting long-term retention and improving their organisation's competitiveness in retaining talent.

3.5.3 Limitations and future research

Notwithstanding its contributions, this research has several limitations. First, its exploratory and qualitative nature, based on semi-structured laddering interviews with Italian hospitality employees, renders the findings hardly generalisable to the broader population and/or to employees with a different cultural background. Second, the identification and interpretation of themes and value hierarchies might have been influenced by the researchers' perspectives, introducing some degree of subjectivity. Further issues are related to the possible bias in data analysis by the researchers. Moreover, consistent with limitations reported in previous research on employee perspectives (Ronda et al., 2020), the list of employer attributes elicited in the present study is not exhaustive and does not cover all attributes discussed in prior literature

(Ronda et al., 2018). Some attributes were not mentioned by respondents, leaving certain parts of the hierarchical value maps unexplored.

Building on these limitations, future research could take several directions. For instance, studies could focus more on different employee segments within the hospitality industry, including specific generations, to explore how retention factors vary across age cohorts and career stages. Quantitative approaches could also be adopted to test and validate the value hierarchies identified in this study on larger and more representative samples. Cross-cultural comparisons would allow researchers to examine whether these patterns hold in different countries or cultural contexts. Additionally, similar investigations could be conducted in sectors beyond hospitality, extending the relevance of these insights to other industries. Overall, such research would strengthen the generalisability of the findings and provide practical guidance for organisations aiming to design effective employer branding and, in particular, retention strategies.

Moreover, a particularly promising avenue for future research concerns the resonance between the employer brand and the personal values of employees. As noted by Ronda et al. (2020), understanding how organisational attributes align with individual value systems is crucial for long-term retention. Future studies should therefore further investigate these dynamics to inform the development of more personalised and effective employee value propositions.

General conclusions

In conclusion, this thesis advances knowledge on hospitality employment by examining the factors that influence job perceptions, attraction to, and retention within the industry. In particular, by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the research identifies the key values that employees and potential job seekers prioritise in the post-pandemic context. The findings also reveal that perceptions of hospitality work are not homogeneous: distinct groups of individuals exhibit different perceptions and attitudes toward employment in this sector.

The study contributes to the literature on employer branding, internal marketing, and talent management, while highlighting the practical importance of aligning organisational strategies with employees' values and expectations. These insights suggest that organisations should consider the values of both current employees and prospective candidates when designing recruitment strategies, job advertisements, and retention initiatives. By doing so, companies can foster greater engagement, satisfaction, and long-term commitment, ultimately enhancing organisational performance. The results provide valuable guidance for managers and policymakers aiming to build more sustainable, attractive, and resilient workplaces within the hospitality sector.

As with any research, this thesis has certain limitations. The qualitative nature of the study and its relatively small sample size limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research could address this limitation by adopting longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to further examine and expand upon these insights.

Additionally, the focus on the Italian context limits cross-cultural applicability. Comparative studies across different countries or sectors could offer valuable perspectives on how cultural factors shape employment perceptions.

Further research may investigate the extent to which emerging technologies and sustainability practices influence the appeal of hospitality jobs, particularly among younger generations.

Industry Dissemination of Results

As an industrial PhD programme, the outcomes of the research were shared and discussed in several collaborative meetings organised by the company (Formazione Point s.r.l. – NexumStp S.p.A.). In particular, I had the opportunity to present the main findings of the thesis during a seminar held in April 2024, as part of a short master’s programme, and another seminar held in March 2025 at Confindustria Centro Nord Sardegna. Both events provided valuable opportunities to disseminate the research findings to an audience of managers from different sectors, many of whom were from the hospitality industry.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Protocol (Chapter I), English translation

Good morning/Good afternoon,

This interview aims to analyse what makes employment in the hospitality sector attractive today. The interview will take about 20–30 minutes. The audio of the interview will be recorded solely to ensure we do not lose any of the information you provide. The data collected will be treated in aggregate and anonymously for research purposes only, and nothing that could identify participants will be disclosed. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Could you tell us what work represents to you in life and what it means to you?
2. Do you think work takes on different meanings and levels of importance at different stages of life? If so, could you explain how?
3. In general, how important is the opportunity to grow and build a career to you?
 - 3.a. Do you think companies in the hospitality sector offer their employees opportunities for career development? Please explain why or why not.
4. Do you have any close family members, relatives or friends working in the hospitality sector?
[] YES [] NO
 - 4.a. If YES, please continue with the following questions:
 - What do these family members, relatives or friends do?
 - Do they encourage or discourage you from pursuing a career in the hospitality sector?Please tell us what they say.
5. Have you ever turned down a job in the hospitality sector? If yes, could you explain the reasons that led you to refuse it?

Question 6. Have you ever worked in the hospitality sector?

☐ YES (proceed to questions 6.a)

☐ NO (proceed to questions 6.b)

6.a. If YES, please answer the following:

- Could you briefly describe what you did?
- What convinced you to accept the job? (If helpful: pay, working hours, lifestyle, etc.)
- Thinking about your experiences in the hospitality sector, choose your best and worst experiences. Could you describe them and explain what made them the best and the worst?
- In light of your experiences, what is your overall view of working in the hospitality sector? Please highlight both strengths and weaknesses, the feelings or emotions it evokes, what you like and dislike about this field, etc.
- Do you think work in this sector is suitable for everyone and at any stage of life, or not? Why?
- Overall, are you still interested in working in the hospitality sector?
 - a. If yes, could you explain the reasons for this?
 - b. If no, could you tell us when and why you decided (or are deciding) to change your mind?
- In your view, what characteristics would your ideal job in the hospitality sector have — the “perfect” workplace?
- What could employers in the hospitality sector do to make work in the industry more attractive?
- Could public institutions, schools (at all levels), or professional associations do anything to make work in the hospitality sector more appealing? If so, what?
- Take a moment to think about job adverts you have read for positions in the hospitality sector. What typically attracts your interest in these adverts, and what puts you off?

6.b. If NO, please answer the following:

- Could you explain why you have never considered working in the hospitality sector?
- What characteristics would your ideal job in the hospitality sector have?
- What could employers in the hospitality sector do to make jobs in their industry more attractive?

- Could public institutions, schools (at all levels), or professional associations do anything to increase the sector's attractiveness? If so, what?

- Gender:
- Age:
- Marital status (single, married, etc.):
- Do you have children? Ages?
- Education level:
- Have you studied tourism-related subjects? (e.g. hospitality school, degree in tourism, master's, etc.)
- Current employment status:
- Which foreign languages do you speak?
- Do you have any family members working in the hospitality sector?
- How many years of experience do you have in the hospitality sector?
- Province/Region of residence:

Appendix B. Questionnaire (Chapter II), English translation

Good morning/Good afternoon,

This survey aims to analyse the factors that make work in the hospitality sector attractive or unattractive and to identify strategies for creating more appealing job positions. Completing the questionnaire will take no more than 8–10 minutes. Please answer all questions, as incomplete questionnaires cannot be used for the study. All responses will remain anonymous (no personal information, such as name, surname, or email address, will be requested). Data will be treated in aggregate form, fully complying with current privacy regulations (Legislative Decree 101/2018), and used solely for scientific purposes.

Thank you for your valuable cooperation and have a good day.

The research team

Work Experience in the Hospitality Sector

Have you ever worked in the hospitality sector?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you answered Yes to the previous question, please indicate the total number of years you have worked in the hospitality sector:

☐ <1 ☐ 1–3 ☐ 4–10 ☐ 11–15 ☐ 16–20 ☐ 21–25 ☐ 26–30 ☐ >31

Based on your work experience in the hospitality sector (or what you normally hear in daily life), please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by selecting a number from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree):

Working in the hospitality sector...

... is enjoyable	1	2	3	4	5
... is interesting	1	2	3	4	5
... is satisfying	1	2	3	4	5
... is stimulating	1	2	3	4	5
... allows me to use my knowledge and skills	1	2	3	4	5
... allows me to acquire transferable skills for other sectors	1	2	3	4	5
.. allows me to always learn something new	1	2	3	4	5

... reflects my personality	1	2	3	4	5
... makes me feel like 'a servant at the service of others'	1	2	3	4	5
... guarantees good working conditions	1	2	3	4	5
... offers more advantages than disadvantages	1	2	3	4	5
... offers personal growth opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
... allows me to express creativity	1	2	3	4	5
... allows me to develop a wide network	1	2	3	4	5
... allows interaction with people from different cultures	1	2	3	4	5
... offers salaries adequate for the stress involved	1	2	3	4	5
... offers salaries adequate for the hours worked	1	2	3	4	5
... offers a good work-life balance	1	2	3	4	5
... negatively affects family life	1	2	3	4	5
... offers good travel opportunities	1	2	3	4	5

Hospitality companies offer...

... adequate benefits (financial and non-financial)	1	2	3	4	5
... good opportunities to become a manager	1	2	3	4	5
... quality accommodation for staff	1	2	3	4	5
... quality staff canteen services	1	2	3	4	5
... adequate work shifts	1	2	3	4	5
... clear career paths	1	2	3	4	5
... flexible working hours	1	2	3	4	5
... reasonable salaries even for entry-level positions	1	2	3	4	5
... opportunities for continuous training	1	2	3	4	5

Hotel managers...

... have good delegation skills	1	2	3	4	5
... do not make much effort to ensure staff satisfaction	1	2	3	4	5
... treat staff fairly	1	2	3	4	5
... reward staff for their work	1	2	3	4	5
... lack adequate skills for their role	1	2	3	4	5

Based on your work experience in the hospitality sector (or on what you normally hear in your daily life), please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by

selecting a number from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Hospitality companies provide reward systems for employees	1	2	3	4	5
Hospitality companies adequately invest in professional classroom training staff	1	2	3	4	5
Hospitality companies adequately invest in on-the-job training for staff	1	2	3	4	5
Work in the hospitality sector is usually seasonal, which does not excite me	1	2	3	4	5
The work environment in hospitality is pleasant	1	2	3	4	5
Workloads in hospitality are reasonable	1	2	3	4	5
Most jobs in hospitality require few skills	1	2	3	4	5
Work in hospitality is considered prestigious	1	2	3	4	5
I would prefer that my child does not work in the hospitality sector	1	2	3	4	5
I would recommend friends, family, or relatives, to work in hospitality	1	2	3	4	5

Imagine you are looking for a job in hospitality. How important would it be for you that the job posting includes the following features? (1 = not important, 3 = neither important nor unimportant, 5 = very important)

Contract type	1	2	3	4	5
Salary	1	2	3	4	5
Working hours	1	2	3	4	5
Work location	1	2	3	4	5
Company information (history, size, clientele, identity, philosophy, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Possible benefits and bonuses	1	2	3	4	5
Role and responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
Onboarding policies for new hires	1	2	3	4	5
Training opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
Information on meals	1	2	3	4	5
Information on accommodation	1	2	3	4	5
Required experience level	1	2	3	4	5
Career growth prospects	1	2	3	4	5
Sociodemographic characteristics of the ideal candidate (age, education, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5

Below are statements describing possible reasons why your attitude toward work may have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please indicate your level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

My attitude towards work has changed because the pandemic made me realise the importance of...

... maintaining both physical and mental well-being	1	2	3	4	5
... having more free time to devote to myself, my family, and my friends	1	2	3	4	5
... achieving a good work-life balance	1	2	3	4	5

Are you currently employed in the hospitality sector? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you **do not currently work** in the hospitality sector, please rate your agreement with the following statements on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree). After answering this question, please go directly to the sociodemographic questions.

My family would be proud if I decided to work in a hospitality company	1	2	3	4	5
I would be happy to consider the possibility of pursuing a professional career in the hospitality sector	1	2	3	4	5

If you **currently work** in the hospitality sector, please rate your agreement with the following statements on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

My family is proud of my job in a hospitality company	1	2	3	4	5
I am happy with my professional growth path in the hospitality sector	1	2	3	4	5

Could you tell us what position you currently hold?

- ☐ General Manager ☐ Assistant Manager ☐ Receptionist ☐ Front Office Staff
☐ Concierge ☐ Booking Officer ☐ Waiter/Waitress ☐ Restaurant Maître
☐ Chef ☐ Kitchen Staff ☐ Food & Beverage Manager ☐ Housekeeping Manager
☐ Room Attendant ☐ Maintenance Worker
☐ Other (please specify): _____

Could you specify the type of your current employment contract?

- ☐ Fixed-term ☐ Permanent ☐ Apprenticeship ☐ Seasonal ☐ On-call/occasional collaboration
☐ Curricular/extracurricular internship

Are you considering changing jobs in the future?

- ☐ Yes, but still within the hospitality sector
☐ Yes, within tourism but not in the hospitality sector
☐ Yes, in a completely different sector outside tourism and hospitality

☐ No

☐ I don't know

Sociodemographic Questions

Gender

☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Non-binary ☐ Prefer not to answer

Age

☐ 18–25 ☐ 26–35 ☐ 36–45 ☐ 46–55 ☐ 56–65 ☐ ≥66

Marital Status

☐ Single ☐ In a relationship ☐ Married ☐ Separated/Divorced ☐ Cohabiting
☐ Widowed

Do you have children?

☐ No ☐ Yes, 1 child ☐ Yes, 2 children ☐ Yes, 3 or more children

Highest level of education completed

☐ Middle school ☐ High school diploma ☐ Bachelor's degree
☐ Master's degree ☐ Other Master ☐ PhD

Which of the following employment statuses best describes you at the moment?

☐ Student ☐ Working student ☐ Employed ☐ Unemployed ☐ Retired

Where do you usually look for new job opportunities? (you may select more than one option)

☐ LinkedIn ☐ Recruitment agencies ☐ Company websites ☐ Word of mouth
☐ Social networks (Facebook, etc.) ☐ Temporary work agencies
☐ Other (please specify): _____

Region of residence (please specify):

Appendix C. Interview protocol (Chapter III), English translation

Interview protocol – Laddering

Part one

1. Could you tell me the name of the first hospitality company that comes to your mind where you have worked or are currently working for?
2. Now, could you tell me the name of the first hospitality company that comes to mind when you think of a positive workplace?
3. Could you tell me the name of the first hospitality company that comes to mind when you think of a negative workplace?
4. Please take a few moments to compare the positive and negative workplaces you mentioned. Could you describe: In what ways are these two workplaces similar? In what ways do they differ?
5. Now, please compare the first workplace you mentioned (Question 1) with the positive and negative workplaces. Could you describe: In what ways is it similar to the positive workplace? In what ways is it different from the positive and negative workplaces?
6. Thinking about a workplace in the hospitality sector that you would consider an ideal workplace, what are five or six key attributes it should have?

Part two

The interviewer will now take note of each of the attributes mentioned in response to Question 6. At this point, the interviewer will repeat the remaining part of the interview protocol for each of the attributes listed.

You mentioned this attribute (repeat to the interviewee the first attribute they mentioned). Could you explain in more detail how a hospitality company could implement this attribute to make the workplace an ideal workplace?

For example, the interviewee might have mentioned as the first attribute that the workplace should have “a harmonious environment.”

Now, could you tell us why this attribute is important to you in a workplace?

Note: In answering this question, the interviewee will usually indicate that this attribute is important to achieve a certain benefit. In other words, they will explain why this attribute matters to them personally (e.g., to avoid conflicts among colleagues).

Example:

Why is it so important for you that the workplace allows you to “avoid conflicts among colleagues”?

The interviewee might respond, for example, that this is important to work peacefully.

Why is it so important for you to be in a company where you can “work peacefully”?

The interviewee will then explain why working peacefully is important to them, for example, to feel more motivated, and so on.

This process should continue until the respondent is no longer able to elaborate further. If the interview reaches a standstill, the interviewer can ask about the emotions and feelings that come to mind when imagining being in that situation. Example: “Now imagine yourself in a workplace that allows you to work peacefully and feel motivated. What emotions and feelings come to mind?”

The questions in this second part should also be repeated for all other attributes mentioned by the interviewee in response to Question 6.

Demographic information:

- Gender
- Age
- Marital status (single, married, etc.)
- Do you have children? If yes, age(s)
- Highest level of education completed
- Have you studied any tourism-related subjects (e.g., hospitality school, tourism degree, master’s program, etc.)?
- Current employment status
- Which foreign languages do you speak?
- Do you have family members working in the hospitality or restaurant industry?
- How many years of experience do you have in the hospitality and restaurant sector?
- Province/Region of residence



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Missione 4 (“Istruzione e ricerca”) – Componente 2 (“Dalla ricerca all’impresa”), Investimento 3.3. (“Introduzione di dottorati innovativi che rispondono ai fabbisogni di innovazione delle imprese e promuovono l'assunzione dei ricercatori da parte delle imprese”)

