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Abstract

Purpose – Grounded in the job demands–resources theory, this study investigates how the difficulty in social distancing at work, resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, may lead to intention to quit and career regret and how and when these effects may be attenuated.

Design – Three-wave survey data were collected from 223 frontline service workers in a large restaurant company during the COVID-19 crisis.

Findings – The results show that difficulty in social distancing reduced employees' work engagement, and consequently increased their turnover intention and career regret. These relationships were moderated by external employability, such that the influence of difficulty in social distancing weakened as external employability increased.

Originality – Social distancing measures have been applied across the globe to minimize transmission of COVID-19. However, such measures create a new job demand for service workers who find it difficult to practice social distancing due to the high contact intensity of service delivery. This study identified personal resources that help service workers cope with the demand triggered by COVID-19.

Keywords: Social distancing; COVID-19; employability; work engagement; turnover intention; career regret

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing measures have been implemented worldwide to minimize physical contact and reduce community viral transmission (Hoffman *et al.*, 2020). Social distancing refers to "reducing the frequency and proximity of contact between people to reduce the risk of spread of a disease" (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020; p. 1127). It is achieved in the work context via two primary measures: working from home and keeping a safe distance between individuals (Avdiu and Nayyar, 2020). In the services literature, Tortorella *et al.* (2020) found that social distancing did not have a negative effect on organizational performance in terms of service quality and service delivery. However, its impact on employee outcomes such as work- and career-related attitudes, in the service sector remains unknown. The present study argues that, regardless of its effectiveness in limiting the spread of the virus, social distancing rules (e.g., working from home, and keeping a distance of at least 1.5–2 meters from others) are difficult to fulfil for service employees working in high physical-proximity occupations (Mongey *et al.*, 2020).

A typical example is hospitality workers (e.g., restaurant employees), who are significantly affected by social distancing practices because the service delivery in this sector requires close physical contact between employees and customers (Gursoy *et al.*, 2021; Khoa *et al.*, 2021; Kotera *et al.*, 2021; Tuzovic and Kabadavi, 2021). Research has consistently shown that hospitality jobs cannot be performed from home and require face-to-face interactions in close proximity with others (see, e.g., Avdiu and Nayyar, 2020; Pouliakas and Branka, 2020; Yu *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, employees in this industry are likely to find it

difficult to practice social distancing (Mongey *et al.*, 2020). In line with the literature (e.g., Avdiu and Nayyar, 2020; Quinn *et al.*, 2011), hospitality employees' difficulty in social distancing is defined as the difficulties in avoiding physical presence or face-to-face communication at work. For example, Avdiu and Nayyar (2020) found that hospitality services are not amenable to home-based work and thus employees must be based in the workplace to perform their role. Similarly, other researchers have also reported that it is difficult for hospitality workers to avoid face-to-face contact or close physical interactions at work (Pouliakas and Branka, 2020). The low potential to work from home and the high face-to-face contact at work co-occur in the food services industry (Avdiu and Nayyar, 2020). This difficulty has negative implications for employee wellbeing (Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021). For example, a survey-based study of 48,676 employees in Europe found that employees in the catering or food service sectors have the highest risk of exposure to COVID-19 (Pouliakas and Branka, 2020).

The adverse effects of the COVID-19 crisis vary across service sectors (Bartsch *et al.*, 2021), depending on the level of customer demand for the service (Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021), with the hospitality industry being one of the hardest-hit service industries (Japutra and Situmorang, 2021; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021). The pandemic has caused a significant drop in customer demand for hospitality services (Mele *et al.*, 2021), leading to a considerable decline in revenue (Gursoy and Chi, 2020) and massive job losses (Cajner *et al.*, 2020). The adverse impact of COVID-19 on the sector has not only led to existing employees' negative attitudes and behaviors, such as anxiety and fear related to COVID-19 infection (Gursoy *et al.*,

2020; Khoa *et al.*, 2021), career change intention (Bufquin *et al.*, 2021; Chen and Chen, 2021), job dissatisfaction (Kang *et al.*, 2021), job insecurity (Hu *et al.*, 2021), and absenteeism (Karatepe *et al.*, 2021), but also reduced the attractiveness of hospitality as an industry for prospective workers such as hospitality students (Birtch *et al.*, 2021). The negative occupational attitudes triggered by the COVID-19 crisis are likely to hinder the revival of the industry because they effect employee work-related behaviors and the delivery of customer services (Yu *et al.*, 2021).

Against this backdrop, we believe that it is timely to investigate the mechanisms through which the challenges resulting from COVID-19 influence existing hospitality employees' psychological states and how to minimize this influence. The present study, using three-wave survey data from the service sector in China, examines how difficulty in social distancing impacts hospitality workers' turnover intentions and career regret (e.g., regret about having chosen to enter the current profession or industry). We focus on the difficulty in social distancing because it is one of the most significant health and business challenges facing hospitality organizations and an important cause of this service sector's financial downturn in the context of COVID-19 (Hao *et al.*, 2020). Despite the considerable individual and organizational costs associated with the difficulty in social distancing, "no study has examined the impact created by social distancing during a pandemic on service organizations" (Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021, p. 146). Moreover, extant research has mainly focused on the impact of social distancing on increased unemployment rates (Gupta *et al.*, 2020) and improved COVID-19 transmission control (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). There is no empirical research examining the

effect of social distancing difficulty on work experiences and career attitudes among service employees who are required to be in the workplace to perform their jobs. Addressing this research gap is important, because without such knowledge we cannot directly identify targeted job or personal resources that offset detrimental consequences of social distancing rules to support service workers. From a conceptual level, researchers (e.g., Finsterwalder, 2020; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021) have uniformly predicted that social distancing will have negative implications for employees and their wellbeing, particularly in service organizations. As a result, scholars (e.g., Donthu *et al.*, 2021; Sajtos *et al.*, 2021; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021) have called for future research looking into employee outcomes of social distancing in the service industry.

We conceptualize and empirically test a model to explore how and when difficulty in social distancing influences hospitality employees' turnover intention and career regret (Figure 1). Drawing upon the job demands–resources (JD-R) theory (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), we investigate a novel mediation process (i.e., work engagement) that links the difficulty in social distancing, as a hindrance job demand caused by COVID-19, to increased turnover intention and career regret. Work engagement is considered the mediator because it has been recognized as an immediate consequence of various job characteristics (e.g., Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) and a predictor of career-related outcomes (e.g., Barnes and Collier, 2013; Laschinger, 2012). As JD-R theory also underscores the role of personal resources in handling undesired demanding situations (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014), we further argue that one's perceived external employability could serve as a personal resource to buffer the negative influence of

difficulty in social distancing. Perceived external employability is usually defined as employees' perceived ease of finding new employment with another employer in the external job market (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012). Extending this concept to our context, it means the extent to which employees perceive that they are also employable outside of the hospitality industry. It is considered as a moderator because such a positive self-evaluation strengthens employees' perceptions of job resources, such as job control and mastery at work (Presti *et al.*, 2020). As a result, employees tend to focus more on job resources than job demands (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007) thereby perceiving hindrance demands to be less threatening and more manageable. This positive cognitive evaluation helps ameliorate the detrimental effects of job demands (e.g., difficulty in social distancing). Based on JD-R theory, we anticipate that as perceived external employability increases, hospitality workers will be more psychologically capable of managing the demands associated with difficulty in social distancing and, as a result, demonstrate less withdrawal behaviors (e.g., be more engaged at work), and subsequently more willing to stay and become positive about their occupational choices.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The current study contributes to the literature in important ways. First, it is a timely attempt to empirically explore the process through which difficulty in social distancing during a pandemic can shape the work and career attitudes of service employees. Exploring the work engagement-based mediation mechanism extends recent contextual frameworks (e.g., Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021), which highlight detrimental effects of social distancing practices on employee wellbeing in service industries, by revealing downstream implications on hospitality

employees' attitudes toward their careers. In doing so, our study goes beyond the current, prevalent focus on job insecurity (Wilson *et al.*, 2020) and the economic recession (Nicola *et al.*, 2020) to offer finer-grained explanations of hospitality workers' attitudes to their vocation. Second, we confirm perceived external employability as a boundary condition that alleviates the harmful effects of difficulty in social distancing on employees' work engagement and, in turn, on turnover intention and career regret. We enrich JD-R theory (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) by verifying perceived external employability as a personal resource that offsets the negative impact of job demands. This responds to the continuing call for empirical support for the moderating role of personal resources in the JD-R model (Tremblay and Messervey, 2011). Our identification of the buffering role of perceived external employability also contributes to the service management literature which has mainly focused on identifying direct effects of the COVID-19 crisis on career attitudes (e.g., Bufquin *et al*., 2021; Yu *et al.*, 2021).

2. Hypothesis development

2.1. Difficulty in social distancing and employee attitudes: Work engagement as a mediator

The JD-R model (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) provides a reasonable theoretical lens for the mediating role of work engagement in explaining the influence of difficulty in social distancing on employee attitudes (e.g., turnover intention and career regret). It proposes that hindrance job demands will divert individuals' attention away from work engagement (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2013), the latter defined as "a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related wellbeing" (Leiter and Bakker, 2010, p. 1). Job demands are "physical, social or

organizational aspects of the job that consume physical or mental effort and therefore induce certain physiological and psychological costs" (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001, p. 501). Clearly, the need to practice social distancing at work would consume individuals' psychological attention and create more pressure for hospitality workers. This is because this special circumstance creates conflict in one's mental model where they need to deal with two undesirable challenges: one being the necessary but clumsy practice of social distancing, and the other being the struggle to do this due to the low potential for remote work and the contact-heavy nature of their jobs. Thus, in this context, difficulty in social distancing represents a hindrance demand that depletes hospitality employees' energy resources. Hindrance demands cost effort and consume energy and are therefore perceived as obstacles to employees' personal growth, learning, and goal accomplishment (Crawford *et al.*, 2010). Research shows that, as hindrance demands increase, employees are less motivated to devote efforts to coping with difficulties and more likely to adopt a passive, disengaged style of coping (Crawford *et al.*, 2010).

In line with this rationale, employees' difficulty in social distancing as a hindrance demand may prevent their work engagement. As mentioned earlier, hospitality jobs cannot be done from home and necessitate high physical proximity (Avdiu and Nayyar, 2020). Both job characteristics make it difficult for employees to comply with the exacting physical distancing rules, thereby increasing their fear, anxiety and risk of COVID-19 exposure (Gursoy *et al.*, 2021; Khoa *et al.*, 2021; Pouliakas and Branka, 2020) and hindering their work goal achievement. As a self-protection mechanism, employees are unwilling to invest effort into coping with such a job hindrance because they believe that no reasonable amount of effort will

be adequate to overcome the hindrance (Crawford *et al.*, 2010). This cognitive appraisal prompts employees to withdraw from the situation (Crawford *et al.*, 2010). The consequence of this withdrawal behavior is work disengagement (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Overall, these arguments suggest that difficulty in social distancing during COVID-19 may be overtaxing and energy depleting among hospitality workers as they deal with the associated psychological burdens and physical dangers. Under such circumstances, they are likely to disengage from work to protect themselves from the strain of further energy depletion. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Difficulty in social distancing is negatively related to employees' work engagement.

Turnover intention is "a conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization" (Tett and Meyer, 1993, p. 262). Employees with high levels of work engagement are inclined to be "more satisfied with their jobs, feel more committed to the organization and do not intend to leave the organization" (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2008, p. 388). In line with this view, evidence suggests that when employees are highly dedicated to their work (a key component of work engagement), they more strongly identify with their current jobs (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008) and perceive more job resources (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2008). The abundance of existing job resources makes them less likely to leave. A key reason for this is that changing jobs means that they will lose the current resources and need to reinvest their time and energy elsewhere, and this is a risk that employees may be reluctant to take on (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008). Reflecting these views, a survey study by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) has confirmed that work engagement is negatively related to employee turnover

intention.

Career regret is an enduring state of wishing that one had not chosen his or her present career (Budjanovcanin *et al.*, 2019). The careers literature has established that individuals' attitudes toward their career are driven by their experiences in and perceptions about their current work (e.g., Lee *et al.*, 2000). First, engaged employees believe that work is fun and therefore they are intrinsically motivated at work (Shimazu *et al.*, 2015). Research indicates that if employees feel happy and are intrinsically motivated, they are less likely to regret their job choices (Bellemare, 2015). In contrast, disengaged employees' lower vigor (an essential component of work engagement; Leiter and Bakker, 2010) will likely decrease their work and occupational interest and thus lead to career choice regret (Dyrbye *et al.*, 2020). These perspectives suggest a potential negative relationship between work engagement and career regret. In other words, work engagement tends to reduce career regret. Second, work engagement enables employees to retain or even enhance their sense of self-worth (Shamir, 1991). The development and maintenance of self-worth at work in turn prompts them to remain in their current occupation (Jiang *et al.*, 2020) and lowers the chance of regretting their occupational choice. This notion is supported by Laschinger (2012) who found that being engaged at work makes employees less likely to develop an intention to leave their current profession. From this we suggest that:

Hypothesis 2: Work engagement is negatively related to turnover intention (2a) and career regret (2b).

When explaining Hypothesis 1, our discussions have highlighted that, for hospitality

employees, the difficulty in practicing social distancing at work represents a job demand that consumes effort and energy and hinders work goal achievement (Crawford *et al.*, 2010). To protect themselves from further energy depletion and future frustrations of not realizing work goals, employees are inclined to withdraw from the current situation (Crawford *et al*., 2010). Such withdrawal behaviors subsequently result in disengagement from work (Demerouti et al, 2001). As per our conceptualization of Hypothesis 2, work engagement enables employees to experience high levels of fun (Shimazu *et al.*, 2015) and identify with their work (Leiter and Bakker, 2010), thereby reducing their turnover intention and career regret. As such, the social distancing difficulty, which results in work disengagement, would increase the possibility that employees feel regret about their career choice and consider leaving their jobs. Integrating these perspectives which indicate linked relationships between difficulty in social distancing, work engagement, turnover intent and career regret, we propose that:

Hypothesis 3: Work engagement mediates the effects of difficulty in social distancing on turnover intention (3a) and career regret (3b).

2.2. The moderating influence of perceived external employability

The current COVID-19 health crisis has negatively affected employment throughout the hospitality industry, leading to limited career opportunities (Huang *et al.*, 2020). Given this, employees might consider finding jobs in other industries although noting that many other industries have also been affected by the crisis (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020). This makes reflection on one's own external employability highly relevant for hospitality workers. It should be noted

that the perception of high external employability does not necessarily mean the inclination to leave the current organization or occupation. Rather, perceived external employability is more of a reflection on career mobility (Berntson and Marklund, 2007), which, in the context of COVID-19, indicates a psychological sense of safety or security about one's future employment. Specifically, when hospitality workers think that they are employable in other industries, they might feel more secure about their employment status than those who perceive themselves as less employable externally, partly because of a reduced concern about losing livelihoods (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012). Also important, perceived external employability denotes the individual's confidence in their capabilities in difficult job situations (Berntson *et al.*, 2010).

Researchers (e.g., De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012) have recognized perceived external employability as a personal resource that contributes to employees' positive aspects of the self, resiliency, and capability to navigate through challenging employment environments (Hobfoll *et al*., 2003). According to the JD-R model, personal resources are moderators that buffer the negative effects of job demands on work engagement (Xanthopolou *et al.*, 2013). These resources shape the way employees perceive and react to their work environment (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014) and promote the individual's positive self-regard and sense of ability to control demanding situations (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). Thus, employees with personal resources have more energy to deal with job demands and are more effective in doing so (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2013). As a result, job demands are perceived as less confronting and their effects on work engagement are alleviated.

As highlighted earlier, difficulty in social distancing may constrain employees' ability

to be engaged at work. We argue that perceived external employability as a personal resource could make them more psychologically capable of alleviating these constraints. This is because it represents a positive self-evaluation which enables employees to create more job resources and perceive less job demands in stressful situations. Specifically, perceived external employability induces feelings of control and mastery at work (Presti *et al.*, 2020). Job control has long been recognized in the JD-R literature as an important job resource that buffers the negative effects of job demands on work engagement (Cheng *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, employees with high perceptions of external employability are well prepared beforehand for the likely demands or threats at work and take a proactive approach to adapting to job demands (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008). This proactive orientation to adaptability facilitates personal learning, and the identification and realization of opportunities needed to cope with the job demands (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008). Consequently, employees are likely to develop a stronger sense of their ability to successfully impact their work environment (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). Under such circumstances, they tend to perceive job demands as surmountable and less threatening and are willing to invest more into coping efforts. This may alleviate the adverse impact of difficulty in social distancing (i.e., the job demand) on work engagement.

Despite the lack of direct empirical support, the literature has documented indirect evidence regarding the moderating effect of perceived external employability. A survey of Pakistan public sector managers found that perceived employability weakens the negative effects of job demands on affective commitment (Kalyal *et al.*, 2010), a key indicator of work engagement (Yalabik *et al.*, 2013). These theoretical arguments and empirical evidence lead to

the hypothesis that:

Hypothesis 4: Perceived external employability moderates the negative relationship between difficulty in social distancing and work engagement such that this relationship is weakened when employees perceive higher levels of external employability.

2.3 Moderated mediation

Hypothesis 3 proposes the mediating role of work engagement in the relationships among difficulty in social distancing on the one hand, and turnover intention and career regret on the other. Hypothesis 4 indicates the moderating role of perceived external employability in the relationship between difficulty in social distancing and work engagement. The two conditions together suggest a moderated mediation effect (Hayes, 2013). Due to its moderating effect on the relationship between difficulty in social distancing and work engagement, we expect perceived external employability to weaken the indirect effects of difficulty in social distancing on turnover intention and career regret. Specifically, we propose:

Hypothesis 5a: The indirect relationship between the difficulty in social distancing and turnover intention via work engagement is moderated by perceived external employability such that this positive indirect effect is weakened when employees perceive higher levels of external employability.

Hypothesis 5b: The indirect relationship between the difficulty in social distancing and career regret via work engagement is moderated by perceived external employability such that this positive indirect effect is weakened when employees perceive higher levels of external

employability.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Data collection

This study is part of a larger research project on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees' career attitudes. All non-managerial personnel working in a large restaurant company in China were invited to participate in this survey. This ensured our sample represented a homogeneous population working in the same organizational context, which reduces the risk of results being impacted by factors such as organizational culture and hierarchies (e.g., Hu *et al.*, 2021; Zhao and Zhou, 2020). Targeting all non-managerial staff also helped minimize the selection bias in the sampling process (Bethlehem, 2010). The company under investigation provided a suitable research context for our study because it had fully experienced the influence of COVID-19 and managed to survive without layoffs and employee pay cuts. The majority of our participants were employed as cashier, host/hostess, bus person and server. All participants' major job responsibilities required them to perform tasks in close physical proximity to others, serving patrons face-to-face, and providing in-person assistance to coworkers or clients. As a result, they consistently reported that they were unable to work remotely or avoid close contact and interaction with coworkers and customers. As noted by the participants, the contact intensive nature of their jobs made it difficult for them to avoid physical presence and face-to-face interaction with others in the workplace. Given that such difficulties in practicing social distance was a common job

hindrance widely experienced by the front-line employees in this restaurant company, we believe that they are appropriate informants for the current research.

We adopted a three-wave time-lagged design to measure the predictor, the mediator, and the outcome at different occasions. This design helps reduce common method variance (Podsakof *et al.*, 2012). The survey was translated from English into Chinese using back translation techniques (Brislin, 1980). We gathered the data at three time points, with a two-week interval in between. The three waves of data were matched via numeric codes uniquely assigned to each participant. The Time 1 survey measured difficulty in social distancing, perceived external employability, and demographic variables. With informed consent, restaurant employees voluntarily filled out the survey during working hours and returned it directly to the research assistants. A total of 242 employees completed the survey at Time 1. Two weeks later (Time 2), a second survey was distributed to these participants to collect the measure of work engagement. All the respondents at Time 1 completed the questionnaire at Time 2. In the third round of data collection (Time 3), our survey measured the two outcome variables (i.e., turnover intention and career regret). Of those participants at Time 2, 223 (response rate = 92%) returned the questionnaire at Time 3. Results[1] based on *t*-test and chi-square test indicated no statistically significant differences in any of our focal variables

[1]There were no significant group differences in age: $t = -0.68$, $p > .05$; in tenure: $t = -0.95$, $p > .05$; in gender: $\chi^2 (1) = 0.96$, $p > .05$; in difficultly in social distancing: $t = 0.95$, $p > .05$; in external employability: $t = 1.27$, $p > .05$; and in engagement: $t = 0.61$, $p > .05$.

between employees who dropped out during data collection and those who completed all surveys.

In our final sample, 53.81% of the participants were male. Our respondents had a mean age of 29.89 years (SD = 13.01), and an average organizational tenure of 1.21 years (SD = 1.46).

3.2. Measures

Unless noted otherwise, the survey response was made on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "7 = strongly agree".

3.2.1. Difficulty in social distancing (Time 1)

Difficulty in social distancing was measured with a 6-item scale developed by Quinn *et al.* (2011). In the general introduction of this measure, participants were asked to reflect on their current situation at work when responding to the items. For example, referring to their current situation, participants responded to statements such as: "My job can only be done at workplace". While this measure is well-established in the context of pandemics (e.g., the H1N1 influenza pandemic) and has proved to be valid in previous studies, COVID-19 is a new pandemic which has a much wider and severe impact. Thus, being cautious, we employed a rigorous approach to evaluate the content validity of Quinn *et al.*'s (2011) measure and ensure it would appropriately capture the meaning or definition of difficulty in social distancing in our study.

Following the judge panel review approach (Jiang, 2017; Jiang *et al.*, 2019; MacKenzie

et al., 1991), we used two panels (an expert-judge panel and a layperson-judge panel) to assess whether the measurement items reflected the concept of difficulty in social distancing in a Chinese context. The expert panel consisted of 7 bilingual researchers who either held PhDs (n = 4) or were final-stage PhD students (n = 3), while the layperson panel included 11 front-line employees working in other nearby restaurants who were in the same situation as our participants throughout the pandemic. As with Jiang *et al.* (2019), we provided each judge with a definition of difficulty in social distancing at the top of a one-page document and asked the judge to assess all measurement items against the criterion: whether the item is conceptually consistent with the definition shown at the top of the page. The judges evaluated the items on a 3-point scale (1 = inconsistent, 2 = marginally consistent, and 3 = consistent). As per Lawshe (1975), the content validity of an item on a scale requires more than 50% of the panel members to agree that the item is at least to some extent consistent with the definition. In both panel reviews, all items exceeded Lawshe's (1975) threshold of 50% and achieved broad consistency (including marginal consistency) with the definition of difficulty in social distancing. Specifically, in the expert panel review, the items achieved broad consistency ranging from 71% to 100%, exceeding the threshold of 50%. In the layperson panel review, all items achieved broad consistency of 100%. These results suggested that Quinn *et al.*'s (2011) measure was content valid to be used in our study. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the scale was .76.

3.2.2. Perceived external employability (Time 1)

We measured perceived external employability outside of the hospitality industry using

an adapted version of Nelissen *et al.*'s (2017) 4-item scale. A sample item is: "I am optimistic that I would find another job outside of the hospitality industry, if I looked for one". The reliability coefficient was .89.

3.2.3. Work engagement (Time 2)

We employed 6 items used by Schmitt *et al.* (2016) to measure work engagement. These items were originally from the shortened Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006), and reflect employees' vigor and dedication at work. Sample items are: "At my work, I feel bursting with energy" and "I am enthusiastic about my job". The response format was a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = never" to "7 = always". The reliability coefficient was .94.

3.2.4. Turnover intention (Time 3)

A 2-item scale developed by Boroff and Lewin (1997) was used to measure turnover intention. An example item is: "I am seriously considering quitting this company for an alternative employer". The reliability coefficient was .95.

3.2.5. Career regret (Time 3)

Brehaut *et al.*'s (2003) 5-item scale for decision regret was adapted to measure participants' regret about choosing a hospitality career. Referring to their hospitality occupation, participants were directed to respond to items such as: "It was not the right career decision". The reliability coefficient was .96.

3.2.6. Control variables

Prior research shows that organizational tenure, gender, and age are predictive of work engagement and career outcomes (e.g., Chung, 2002; Dyrbye *et al.*, 2020; Huo and Boxall, 2017). Therefore, we include these demographics as control variables.

3.3. Analysis

Following previous researchers (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2018), we used a two-step approach in the data analysis process. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in AMOS to examine the discriminant validity of the measurement model. We chose three most widely adopted goodness-of-fit indices to assess model fit: the standardized root mean residual (SRMR), the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the comparative fit index (CFI). We then tested the hypotheses using regression analyses. Multiple regression was utilized to examine Hypotheses 1 and 2. We adopted bootstrap-based PROCESS analysis based on 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013) for Hypothesis 3 (mediating effects) and Hypothesis 5 (moderated mediation effects). Hierarchical regression analysis was applied to test Hypothesis 4, which involves the interaction effect of difficulty in social distancing and perceived external employability on work engagement.

4. Results

4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

We conducted a CFA with five latent variables including difficulty in social distancing,

perceived external employability, work engagement, turnover intention, and career regret. The model fit indices are adequate: $\chi^2(220) = 450.742$, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06, and CFI = .95. When compared to alternative models, such as a model with difficulty in social distancing and perceived external employability combined into one factor, the original 5-factor measurement model had the best fit, as shown in Table I. Convergent validity of our measures was supported by the adequate fit of the full measurement model and standardized factor loadings larger than 0.40 (Kline, 2011). Evidence of discriminant validity of the measures is shown by the fact that the correlations among all variables are significantly smaller than unity (Hewagama *et al.*, 2019). Descriptive statistics of study variables are reported in Table II.

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

4.2. Hypothesis testing

As shown in Table III, difficulty in social distancing negatively predicted work engagement (b = -0.14, se = .06, $p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Supporting Hypothesis 2a and 2b, work engagement was negatively and significantly related to turnover intention (b = -0.35, se = .09; $p < .001$) and career regret (b = -0.23, se = .08, $p < .01$).

INSERT TABLE III ABOUT HERE

To test Hypotheses 3a and 3b, the bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect were estimated via PROCESS analysis (Hayes, 2013). The indirect effect of

difficulty in social distancing on turnover intention via work engagement was significant, given that the confidence interval for this indirect effect ($b = 0.05$, boot $se = .02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.10]) did not cross zero. Therefore, Hypothesis 3a was confirmed. In addition, difficulty in social distancing had a positive indirect effect on career regret ($b = 0.03$, boot $se = .02$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.071]) through work engagement.

Table IV displays results for Hypothesis 4 (the moderator role of perceived external employability). In Step 1, age, gender, and organizational tenure were entered into the equation as control variables. Difficulty in social distancing and perceived external employability were entered in Step 2. The interaction term between difficulty in social distancing and perceived external employability was entered in Step 3. The variables (i.e., difficulty in social distancing and perceived external employability) involved in the interaction were centered before analysis. The interaction term was statistically significant ($b = 0.10$, $se = .04$, $p < .05$) in predicting and explaining additional variance of ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p < .05$) work engagement. Figure 2 is a graphical presentation of this interaction effect. We plotted the relationship between difficulty in social distancing and work engagement at one standard deviation above and below the mean of perceived external employability. It was found that the negative effect of difficulty in social distancing on work engagement was higher when perceived external employability was low (slope = -0.28, $t = -3.10$, $p < .01$) rather than high (slope = -0.01, $t = -0.13$, $p > .05$).

INSERT TABLE IV ABOUT HERE

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Supporting Hypothesis 5a, the PROCESS results showed that the indirect effect of difficulty in social distancing on turnover intention via work engagement was stronger for those employees who perceived low (b = 0.10, boot se = .04, 95% CI [0.03, 0.18]) rather than high (b = 0.00, boot se = .03, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.06]) levels of external employability. The index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) was significant (b = -0.03, boot se = .02, 95% CI [-0.07, -0.01]), further confirming Hypothesis 5a.

A similar analytic procedure was used to validate Hypothesis 5b. The indirect effect of difficulty in social distancing on career regret through work engagement was larger when perceived external employability was low (b = 0.06, boot se = .03, 95% CI [0.01, 0.13]) rather than high (b = 0.00, boot se = .02, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.04]). Moreover, the index of moderated mediation was significant (b = -0.02, boot se = .01, 95% CI [-0.049, -0.003]), supporting Hypothesis 5b.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical implications

Underpinned by the JD-R model (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), we proposed work engagement as the mechanism through which difficulty in social distancing in the hospitality setting would affect employees' turnover intention and career regret. Furthermore, we posited that this mediated relationship would be moderated by an important personal resource—perceived external employability. Our three-wave survey supported all the hypotheses. The theoretical implications of our study are manifold.

First, when restaurant employees find it difficult to practice social distancing rules, they tend to disengage from work. This is consistent with the JD-R framework, which proposes a negative association between job demands and work engagement (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). A likely explanation is that difficulty in social distancing, as a job demand, consumes energy and heightens the health risks, fear and anxiety of restaurant workers (Gursoy *et al.*, 2021; Khoa *et al.*, 2021). As a self-protection strategy, they are less likely to be enthusiastic about their work (Crawford *et al.*, 2010). This finding responds to Donthu *et al.*'s (2021) call for future research that examines the impact of social distancing in service sectors. To our knowledge, this is the first piece of empirical evidence that supports Tuzovic and Kabadayi's (2021) conceptual model regarding the adverse effects of social distancing on service employees' wellbeing and career outcomes. This empirical result also confirmed Kotera *et al.*'s (2021) findings that hospitality work involves both physical and emotional demands, which can be detrimental to employee wellbeing.

In addition, our results endorsed prior research on the nexus between engagement and turnover intention (e.g., Bhatnagar, 2012; Memon et al., 2021; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) by showing that highly engaged employees have less intent to leave the current job. Also importantly, our study enriched this nexus by illustrating that engaged workers are less likely to experience career choice regret, which may signal the potential of turnover. These findings extend prior research, which has exclusively focused on the association of work engagement with only organizationally important career attitudes, including career commitment (Barnes and Collier, 2013) and career satisfaction (Laschinger, 2012), by incorporating a career

outcome from the employee's perspective (i.e., career regret). The relationship between work engagement and turnover intention can be explained by high levels of job resources and dedication at work experienced by engaged employees. Under such circumstances, employees are reluctant to leave their current jobs (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008) because they have a tendency to protect their existing job resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Similarly, because engaged employees are characterized by high levels of intrinsic work motivation (Shimazu *et al.*, 2015), they are likely to have developed positive attitudes toward their occupation. This in turn prompts them to perceive less career regret. Our findings emphasize that these perspectives on how work engagement can drive employees' career reflections still hold, even under extreme conditions (e.g., COVID-19).

The negative effect of difficulty in social distancing on work engagement, which exerts an influence on employees' career attitudes, indicates a possible process chain that represents workplace demands' impact on hospitality employees' vocational outcomes. Confirming this process, our study verifies that work engagement as a mediator transmits the effects of difficulty in social distancing on career regret and turnover intention. This adds to the extant research on the consequences of social distancing on service employees, which consistently argues that social distancing hinders service workers and their wellbeing (e.g., Mongey *et al.*, 2020; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2021) but which has not until now tested the underlying explanatory process.

Furthermore, our study found that perceived external employability is a personal resource that alleviates the negative relationship between difficulty in social distancing and

work engagement and, as a consequence, weakens the indirect effects of difficulty in social distancing on turnover intention and career regret through work engagement. An explanation is that highly employable individuals have strong perceptions of employment security (Silla *et al.*, 2009) and self-efficacy beliefs in dealing with unfavorable job situations (Berntson *et al*., 2010). They might view difficulty in social distancing as more manageable and, therefore, such difficulties deplete less of the energy required to be engaged at work. Our identification of the moderating role of the perceived external employability contributes to the literature in three ways. First, this helps address the void of studies on the coping mechanisms that alleviate the adverse effects of social distancing on employee wellbeing and work experiences. Second, this finding adds to the limited evidence in the literature of the interaction between personal resources and job demands as outlined in JD-R theory. Third, extant studies on external employability have uniformly centred on its positive main effect on work engagement (e.g., De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008; Ngo *et al.*, 2017), while its moderating effect remains under studied. This research gap is filled by our current finding that external employability as a buffer can reduce the negative impact of job demands on work engagement. It implies that high levels of perceived employability could help employees manage the negative influence of job demands, and thus shaping their positive attitudes towards their current organizations. This result suggests that, in the context of COVID-19, employees' perceived external employability does not necessarily lead to outcomes that hurt the organization, despite its turnover-stimulating potential as reported in previous research (e.g., Nelissen et al., 2017).

5.2 Practical implications

Our study offers several practical implications for the broader service sector (e.g., personal care, tourism, and hotel industries) that depend on face-to-face and close physical interactions in service delivery. Our results show that the high physical-proximity nature of jobs within these service industries makes it difficult to practice social distancing at work. This subsequently jeopardizes employees' work engagement and career-related attitudes. Based on this finding, in order to maintain service employees' engagement and their positive career attitudes, managers may endeavor to reduce work demands incurred by social distancing difficulties when employees need to be present in the workplace during public health crises like COVID-19. Example strategies may include limiting the number of patrons in the workplace and implementing contactless payment and delivery systems.

Furthermore, it is helpful to encourage customers' co-production behaviors in service delivery so that they can facilitate restaurant workers to practice social distancing during service interactions (Altinay and Arici, 2021). In addition, employers should provide service employees with personal protective equipment (e.g., masks and gloves) to protect their health and safety. The use of facemasks has been shown in prior research as conducive to successful service interactions during the COVID-19 crisis (e.g., Hofmann *et al*., 2021). Also, it would be worthwhile for contact-intensive service organizations to send strong signals (e.g., by modifying their logos) to front-line workers that emphasize the necessity and benefits of social distancing rules (Ali *et al*., 2021). Doing so helps enhance employees' acceptance of social distancing regulations, thereby reducing their perceived threat of social distancing difficulty.

Moreover, our findings indicate that perceived external employability should be a directly targeted personal resource that alleviates the negative effects of the job demand linked with social distancing. One key practical implication of this finding is that, under the current economic downturn and health crisis, the service organizations that require high contact intensity for service delivery may consider assisting employees with skill enhancement, career development, and upward and lateral job transitions. Such practices can enhance their perceptions of employability (Nelissen *et al.*, 2017), which subsequently helps offset the negative effects of social distancing rules on service workers.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

This study has some limitations that future studies should heed. While we ensured that our independent, mediating, and dependent variables were measured at three separate time points to reduce common method variance, we did not implement a repeated measure design. This prevents us from making a rigorous causal explanation of the relationship between difficulty in social distancing, work engagement, and career attitudes. It would be useful for future research to collect repeated measures to examine how changes in employees' perception of difficulty in social distancing affect changes in work engagement and career outcomes. Second, since our study was conducted in a single firm, it remains unclear whether the findings are generalizable to other service industries. For instance, for hotel companies who have hibernated or shut down their operations during the pandemic, their employees may have different experiences with social distancing rules, which leads to their differing affective

responses to their work and career. Therefore, future research could cross-validate our results by collecting data from other organizational settings.

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Table I. CFA results for nested model comparisons

Model	χ^2	*df*	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Model 1	450.742***	220	-	-	.945	.060	.069
Model 2	698.263***	224	247.521***[a]	4	.886	.100	.098
Model 3	721.470***	224	270.728***[a]	4	.881	.067	.100
Model 4	2736.064***	230	2285.322***[a]	10	.399	.219	.222

Note:

Model 1: the baseline model, i.e., the full five-factor measurement model.

Model 2: As with model 1, but with difficulty in social distancing and external employability items loading onto one factor.

Model 3 As with model 1, but with turnover intention and career regret items loading onto one factor.

Model 4: All items loading onto one factor.

*** $p < .001$.

[a] relative to Model 1.

Table II. Means, standard deviations and correlations among variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age (years)	29.89	13.01							
2. Gender	.46	.50	.16*						
3. Tenure (years)	1.21	1.46	.25***	-.11					
4. Difficulty in social distancing	4.32	1.19	.16*	-.04	.10				
5. Perceived external employability	4.04	1.41	.12	.05	.01	.23***			
6. Work engagement	5.17	1.04	-.04	.03	-.07	-.16*	-.10		
7. Turnover intention	2.52	1.38	-.06	-.05	.09	.01	0.00	-.26***	
8. Career regret	2.52	1.28	-.02	-.08	.15*	.10	0.00	-.20**	.66***

Notes. Gender: Male = 0 and female = 1; Off-diagonal elements are correlations.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Table III. Results of multiple regression analyses

Variables	Work engagement	Turnover intention	Career regret
(Constant)	5.79 (.30)***	4.63 (.64)***	3.53 (.60)***
Control variables			
Age	0.00 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)
Gender	0.03 (.15)	-0.05 (.19)	-0.08 (.17)
Tenure	-0.03 (.05)	0.09 (.07)	0.13 (.06)*
Independent variable			
Difficulty in social distancing	-0.14 (.06)*	-0.03 (.08)	0.05 (.08)
Mediator			
Work engagement		-0.35 (.09)***	-0.23 (.08)**
R^2	.03	.08**	.07*

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table IV Results of hierarchical moderated regression analyses

Criterion variable: Work engagement	Step 1 *b* (*se*)	Step 2 *b* (*se*)	Step 3 *b* (*se*)
(Constant)	5.27 (.19)***	5.19 (.19)***	5.17 (.19)***
Control variables			
Age	0.00 (.01)	0.00 (.01)	0.00 (.01)
Gender	0.05 (.15)	0.04 (.15)	0.01 (.14)
Tenure	-0.04 (.05)	-0.04 (.05)	-0.04 (.05)
Main effects			
Difficulty in social distancing		-0.12 (.06)	-0.15 (.06)*
Perceived external employability		-0.05 (.05)	-0.04 (.05)
Interaction effect			
Difficulty in social distancing × Perceived external employability			0.10 (.04)*
R^2	.01	.03	.06*
R^2 change		.03	.03*

Note. *b* indicated unstandardized coefficients. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.
*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

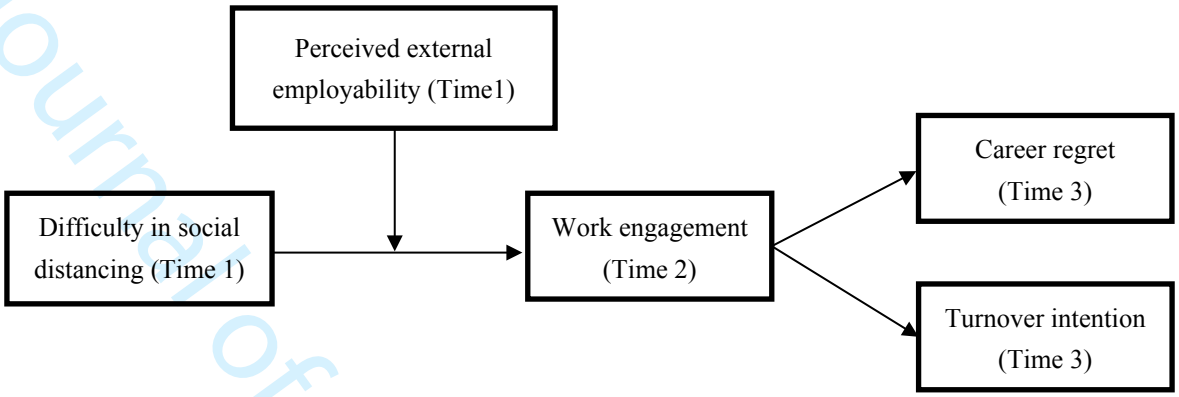

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework: Impact of difficulty in social distancing on hospitality employee outcomes during COVID-19

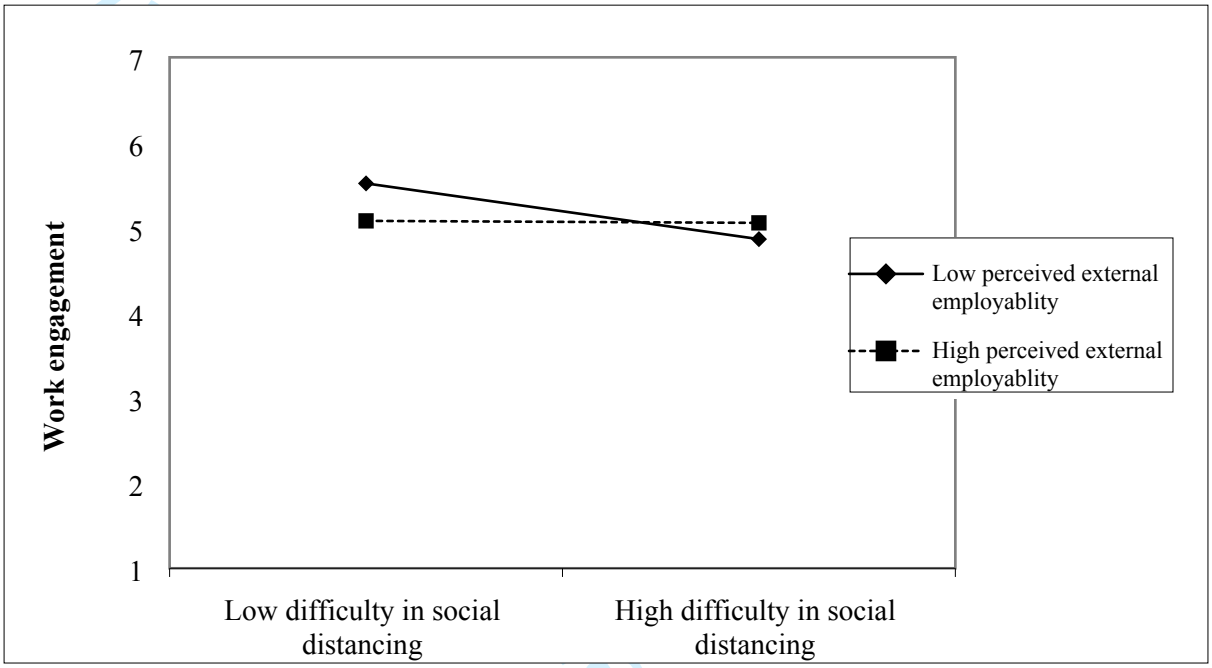

Figure 2. The graphic presentation of the interaction effect of social distancing difficulty and perceived external employability on work engagement.

Appendix. Standardized factor loadings of measurement items on their respective latent factors

Variables	Items	Standardized factor loading
Difficulty in social distancing	1. If public health officials declared that it was necessary for people to stay home from work, it would be difficult for me to stay home from work for 7 to 10 days.	.529
	2. I am not able to work at home.	.752
	3. I will not get paid if stays home from work.	.688
	4. I do not have sick leave at job.	.462
	5. I could lose my job if not able to go to work.	.535
	6. Job can only be done at workplace.	.594
Perceived external employability	1. I am optimistic that I would find another job outside of hospitality, if I looked for one.	.706
	2. I will easily find another job outside of hospitality instead of my present job.	.778
	3. I could easily switch to another job in other industries, if I wanted to.	.915
	4. I am confident that I could quickly get a job with a non-hospitality employer.	.863
Work engagement	1. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	.649
	2. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.	.815
	3. At my job I feel strong and vigorous.	.897
	4. My job inspires me.	.942
	5. I am enthusiastic about my job.	.927
	6. I am proud of the work that I do.	.886
Turnover intention	1. I am seriously considering quitting this company for an alternate employer.	.948
	2. During the next year, I will probably look for a new job outside this firm.	.961
Career regret	1. It was not the right career decision.	.749
	2. I regret the career choice that was made.	.943
	3. I would not go for the same career choice if I had to do it over again.	.930
	4. The career choice did me a lot of harm.	.937

5.	The career decision was not a wise one.	.955