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## **Graduates Dilemma: To Be or Not to Be a Chef**

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### **Abstract**

This study seeks an understanding of the decisions made by culinary graduates whether to work as a chef. This qualitative study involving twelve culinary graduate respondents using semi-structured interviews. Data collected analyzed using thematic analysis. This study found a couple of themes for each motivational and psychological factor. The small number of participants from each group might not represent majority of culinary graduates. Future research can be conducted in different workplace setting and include a larger sample size. Culinary institutions and stakeholders should use the result as to explore the problem thus grasp a solution to said problem.

**Keywords:** Culinary Graduates, Chef, Motivational factor, Psychological Factor

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The flourishing number of higher learning institutions offering a culinary program in Malaysia reflects the popularity of culinary programs among younger Malaysian. Currently, 83 higher learning institutions offer culinary arts programs in Malaysia (MQR, 2021). Despite the increasing number of culinary programs offered by the local higher learning institutions, the insufficient number of graduates working in the industry shows that the industry will continue to face a local labor shortage. Critical Occupations List 2018/2019 report by the Ministry of Human Resource show that the chef has made a list. Chef is at number 48 out of 59 critical occupations listed (TalentCorp, 2020).

In Malaysia, the shortage in the local labor workforce forces hotels to hire foreign workers even though foreigners are not their priority (Jeetesh, 2015). The insufficiency is reflected in the profound number of foreign workers employed in Malaysia's service sector, a total of 306,152 in 2019 (data.gov.my, 2021). It appears that culinary graduates are reluctant to work in the industry.

In general, factors that influence graduates' decisions can be divided into motivational and psychological factors. This study aims to investigate and determine the motivational and psychological factors that influence or discourage culinary graduates from working in the hospitality industry.

### **2.0 Literature Review**

Studies have shown that the relationship between motivation with desirable outcomes and motivation has a beneficial impact on the graduates' career choices, such as Grigorov and Spiridonov (2018) and Lazarides et al. (2020).

Two sub-factors are derived from the motivational factor; the push and pull factors. A push factor is a factor that derives from an external

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factor or environment. Push motivation acts as willpower, and people's willpower is only as strong as the desire behind willpower. One of the push factors that affect a graduate's choice in choosing a career is perception. Graduates usually perceive a career in the hospitality industry as exhausting and unstable with low pay and benefit, poor working conditions, and time sacrifice. Such perception negatively impacts graduates' decisions, and many choose a career outside the hospitality industry (Neequaye & Armoo, 2014).

Graduates in hospitality find it challenging to keep attached to the workplace that requires them to work long hours compared to other sectors (Cheng & Tung, 2019). Remuneration in the hospitality industry is inadequate, and most of the jobs in the hospitality industry are poorly remunerated. This issue is worse in developing countries where tipping is not practiced, and remuneration has not improved (Neequaye & Armoo, 2014).

One of the psychological factors that decide career choice is an intrinsic interest which is a factor that has a relationship with attitude, beliefs, interests, or satisfaction that derive from pursuing something (Law & Yuen, 2012). Personal interests in career decision-making appeared to be an essential factor in the selection of a life career (Atitsogbe et al., 2018).

Much research mentions the importance of parental influence in graduates' career decision-making process. Hashim and Embong (2015) note that parents are more influential, and their advice is vital in student career choices. According to Hoffner et al., (2006), students' career choices correlated with the attributes of the media, especially TV characters. Noble Calkins and Welki (2006) state that friend recommendation positively influences student career choice. Sometimes, close friends influence the student more than their parents in decision-making. Agarwala (2008) found that fathers significantly influence graduates' career choices, but male graduates' second significant influence is friends. However, female graduates choose their mothers as their second most influential persons. Additionally, fathers with professional career backgrounds will positively influence their children's career choices (Agarwala, 2008).

Lastly, graduates' career choices can also be influenced by the media. A study by Maringe (2006) says that factors and key constituent elements that affect student choices include promotion by the media. Television shows about cooking may be one of the influences on graduates' decision to choose chef as a career path.

### 3.0 Methodology

This study employs a descriptive research design using a qualitative approach using semi-structured Interviews without referring to the theoretical framework and hypothesis to reduce bias. The qualitative investigation was conducted using an inductive approach. This study used a cross-sectional study and individuals as the unit of analysis.

The sample size and population of this study are six graduates who work as chefs in the hospitality industry and six graduates who work in various job types in multiple sectors. According to Adler and Adler (2012), 12 respondents are the appropriate number of samples for a qualitative investigation on issues involving college graduates. This study employed a nonprobability sampling method, particularly judgment sampling and snowball sampling, to select the element in the sample.

A set of semi-structured questions was divided into two main sections focused on the respondent's demographic and all relevant questions regarding the informants' career decisions. The interview questions in the second section were adapted from various studies within the scope of the study, such as Agarwala (2008) and Simon and Taylor (2011). A minor modification was made to the adapted questions to suit the study's research objectives and queries and the informant's background. Interviews were conducted through appointments, where place and time were arranged upon interviewees' consent. The interviews were focused on the Klang Valley area as the area has many hotels and centers of attraction for graduates to find a job. Interviews were conducted by the researcher either in English, Bahasa Malaysia, or both according to the interviewees' preference and comfort.

Each interview session takes approximately 30 to 40 minutes. They were asked two questions; the first part was about their demographic, and the second part was about the motivational and psychological factors that influence them to pursue their careers. The interview is recorded and later transcribed on the paper. The transcribed interview was later used in analysis to find the theme using thematic analysis before writing the finding. Qualitative data for this study comes from two sources, the field generated and found data. The field-generated data were processed using six phases of thematic analysis.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Demographic Background

Table 1. Demographic background of respondents

Respondent	Age	Gender	Education level	Industry	Working experience
1	30	F	Degree	Education	1-3 years
2	31	F	Degree	Education	5 years and above
3	23	M	Diploma	Chef	1-3 years
4	25	M	Diploma	Chef	1-3 years
5	23	F	Diploma	Management	1-3 years
6	25	M	Diploma	Chef	5 years and above
7	26	M	Certificate	Chef	5 years and above
8	26	F	Diploma	Finance	Less than 1 year
9	26	M	Degree	Processing	Less than 1 year
10	31	M	Diploma	Chef	5 years and above
11	26	F	Certificate	Chef	5 years and above

## 4.2 Workplace Environment

The working environment is an essential factor in determining the respondents' decision to pursue a career as a chef. For those who work as a chef, the physical environment is less of a concern because the people they are working with are essential in the working environment. For instance:

"One of the reasons many of my friends work in the same field as I am, and I can work with them... I work in a western kitchen, but sometimes I learn to cook Malay and Chinese cuisine from other chefs who are also my friends."[4]

Non-chef respondents also stressed the importance of workplace conditions. Their workplace environment affects their choices of whether to work at the organization, and respondents also highlighted the importance of the people they must work with. Non-chef female respondents prefer to work in organizations with an equal gender population or those that employ more female than male workers. One of the reasons for them not to pursue a career as a chef is because they feel uncomfortable working in an environment populated mainly by males.

"Before I entered the industry, I observed how chefs work, and I realize most of them are males, and not many are women. I think the career of a chef is more suitable for men."[1]

Safety at the workplace is another factor the respondents consider in their career choice decisions. Non-chef respondents suggested that working as a chef in the kitchen poses a higher safety risk than in their current workplace. For example:

"I am in my current job because of my pregnancy. I have changed from pastry kitchen to account department."[8]

## 4.3 Nature of Work

How an organization runs its business has not influenced the chef participants' career decisions. However, all non-chef participants agreed that one of the critical reasons for not pursuing a career as a chef is because they are not in favor of the long working hours practiced by the industry. For them, working hours in the kitchen is unbearable, especially for those who have a family. For example:

"For a long-term commitment, it is hard when you have a family because of the long working hours in the kitchen."[12]

For participants who used to work as a chef, working hours are one of the main reasons for leaving their careers. For instance, respondents stated:

"The time management, the workload, and the working hours are also different. Before this, I worked more than 8 hours of overtime. Now the working hour is fixed at 8 hours without any overtime."[5]

Salary or wage is another crucial factor mentioned by the non-chef participants in their career choice decision. They like their current job because the salary is satisfactory, and the workload is bearable. For example, they stated:

"In terms of reward, it is worthwhile compared to the stress level that I faced because the stress level is low. The working hours are not bad...."[9]

## 4.4 Passion and Interest

Relatively, chef respondents indicate their passion for culinary arts as the main reason for enrolling in the culinary program.

"My interest is in culinary art because I love cooking. Before I enrolled in this course, I already had a part-time job in this field. That was when I realized that cooking is my passion, and it was the starting point for me."[3]

Some work as chefs because they want to gain more knowledge and skills in culinary arts. For example:

"I want to expand my knowledge in this field. Maybe there are things that I do not know I am good at. This is the venue for me to gain more knowledge and understanding through experience that I cannot obtain from college."[4]

From the data, most chefs do not realize the true nature of the work of a chef. Their expectation of the work role of a chef is different, and not until they started to work as a chef that they realized that being a chef is much more than cooking and very challenging. It was not a problem for the chef participants as their passion for the industry overcame all the problems they had to face as a chef.

"... chef needs to work long hours, and it is hard to take a leave because of the busy life of a chef... we need to understand that it is part of the challenge that needs to be faced in this industry. My husband and family understand my job demand, so there is no issue. Some things lead us to stress, but face it part and parcel of the job." [11]

In contrast, some participants choose not to be a chef despite their deep passion for culinary. However, their current job is still related to culinary arts. For instance:

"I like working as a chef and like I said before, I want to open a restaurant. I am really into the hospitality industry, but my passion turns into teaching when I further my study." [2]

#### 4.5 External Influence

The career choice of culinary graduates may also be influenced by external influence, which refers to the influence that he or she gets from a third party. For example:

"I am into cooking because I have an uncle and grandmother who have a culinary background." [10]

Besides family, some respondents stated that their friends influenced their decision to work as a chef.

"One reason is that I have many friends who work in this field, and I can work with them." [4]

External influencing factors can come from various sources, and one of them is the media. The proliferation of cooking programs in the media might influence culinary graduates' decision to work as a chef.

"I like to cook, so I choose culinary art. I was also influenced by the programs shown by the media about the culinary world." [7]

Some non-chef respondents brought up a similar reason. One of the reasons for not pursuing a chef as a career is the influence of family members. For instance, respondent 2 mentioned that she had to quit her job as a chef because of her husband.

"Back then (when working as a chef), I was happy, but it was tiring. I was happy about the rewards, but I did not have enough time for myself. I could not have holidays, and my family members complained that I worked too much. They do not understand because none of my family members is in the hospitality industry... he (my husband) does mind because whenever I must cook for functions or I need to work late, he would not be happy. He does not understand the hospitality field." [2]

#### 4.6 Moderating Factor

The analysis suggests that the demographic profile of the respondents moderates the respondents' career decisions. Some women respondents relate their career choice decision with gender. Some mentioned that the nature of a chef a job is not suitable for women because of the risk it possesses, and the work role is not female-friendly, for example:

"I am in my current job because I am pregnant. I have changed to account department from the pastry kitchen." [8]

"I am a woman, and I do not feel comfortable working in a place that male mostly occupies... I do not really like working in a place full of men." [12]

Marital status may moderate one's decision to work as a chef. Both shift work and the work role of chef are not suitable for married individuals. Working as a chef means less time spent with family. For example:

"He (husband) does mind because he would not be happy whenever I must cook for functions, or I need to work late. He does not understand the hospitality field." [2]

#### 5.0 Discussion

The thematic analysis results show that the workplace environment and the nature of work are the two main motivational factors that affect culinary graduates' career decisions. The workplace environment can be in the form of the physical of the workplace or the people with whom one must work together. Although chef participants admitted that their work role is stressful, they still choose to stay in the industry and apply the skill and knowledge learned in college because they correlate good relationships with colleagues to reduce stress. A good relationship in the workplace is crucial because it can boost employees' motivation to stay in the industry (Blustein et al., 2004).

For the non-chef participants, the workplace environment is an essential factor that discouraged them from pursuing a career as a chef. Female participants are incredibly intimidated by male domination in the commercial kitchen. Although the participants mentioned

that they have a strong passion and interest in culinary arts, they decided not to pursue a career as a chef because they feel that gender imbalances make the kitchen an uncomfortable place to work.

Another theme identified in the analysis is the nature of the work as a chef. The hospitality industry, in general, is perceived as highly labor-intensive. The job as a chef itself involves long working hours and working in shifts. These factors are why the non-chef participants do not pursue a career as a chef. Non-chef participants feel that the nature of the work of a chef would require them to spend more time at work, thus, compromising their family time, therefore, forgoing their ambition to work as a chef. Another reason for the non-chef participants to pursue a different career path after graduating from culinary school is the salary of a chef. In Malaysia, the starting salary as a chef is relatively low (Alberto, 2016).

Passion and interest are factors that decide culinary graduates to pursue a career as a chef. Despite all the negative remarks associated with chefs, all chef respondents continue to work in the commercial kitchen because they are motivated by their passion and interest in culinary arts. Passion and interest are fundamental in determining the direction of graduates' careers (Law & Yuen, 2012). Interestingly, the chef's respondents mentioned that they are serious about pursuing their career as a chef because of the opportunity that they must continue learning, gain experience, and improve their culinary skills. This signifies the passion and interest the participants have in culinary arts. Passion and interest are also crucial to the non-chef respondents. Some of the non-chef respondents' current job is still related to culinary arts. They have a passion for the industry but are reluctant to work as a chef; thus, they find a job related to culinary arts. They still do what they like to do but in a different setting, like teaching cookery.

The analysis results also suggest that chef respondents' decision to keep working as a chef is motivated by external influences such as family and friends. Wong and Liu (2010) note that family members are most influential in graduate career choices. Some of the chef respondents associated having family members working as chefs as a motivational factor that influenced them to pursue a career in the culinary industry. Having a good teammate at work makes them feel comfortable working, although the job is stressful. A good work team act as emotional support as good peers provide a moderate level of trust and disclosure (Peroune, 2007). Another influence that affects a graduate's career choice is the media. The good things shown by the media about chef life and work have somehow influenced them to be a chef as the media usually show only the good side of the field. The rise of celebrity chefs creates awareness and catalysts for respondents to become a chef (Henderson, 2011).

Like motivational factors, the relationship between psychological factors and career decision-making is moderated by demographic characteristics, mainly gender. The lack of women working as a chef is part of why many female respondents are reluctant to pursue a career in this sector. This suggested that sector culture and stereotypes dissuade women from entering certain occupations or professions (Orser & Leck, 2010).

## 5.1 Conceptual Framework

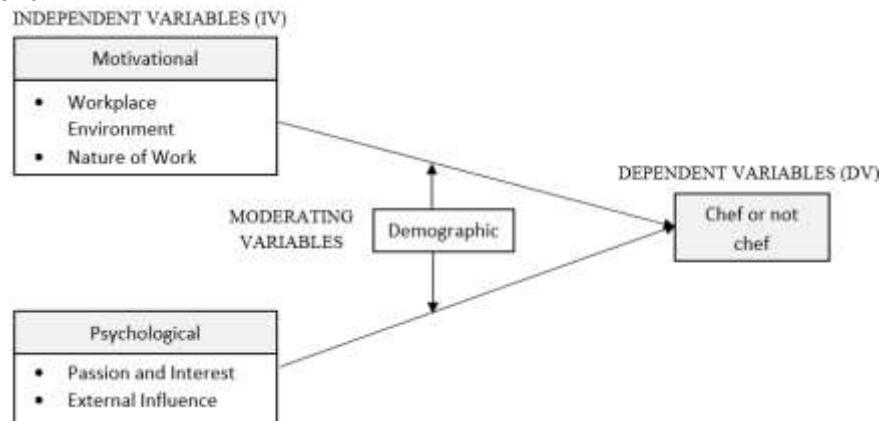


Fig. 1. Relationship between Motivational and Psychological Factor and Career Decision.

## 6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, culinary graduates' career choice is influenced by the workplace environment and the nature of the work under the motivational factor. Culinary graduates' career choice is also influenced by psychological factors, namely passion and interest and external influence. The strength of the impact of both motivational and psychological factors is moderated by demographic characteristics, which are gender differences.

A limitation of the study is the recent interview focuses solely on respondents who work in the Klang Valley area with a small sample size. For future research, the different settings of hotels in other locations with more significant sample sizes may have different results. Further exploration into each variable, including the moderating factor that affected graduates' career choices, can harmonize the finding.

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### Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

At the applied level, the proposed outcomes of this study will enable the government or hospitality employers to find solutions to attract more culinary graduates to pursue a career as a chef and serve the industry. Employers can use the findings to create a competitive advantage to attract culinary graduates to their firms. The factors that discourage culinary graduates from working in the hospitality industry shall be reviewed, improvised, or eliminated to attract more culinary graduates to pursue a career as a chef.

At the theoretical level, this qualitative investigation contributes an in-depth understanding of underlying factors that are important in culinary graduates' decision to pursue or not to pursue a career as a chef and work in the hospitality industry. Exploring the issue using a qualitative approach adds a different perspective to the factors acknowledged in previous studies that were primarily conducted using the quantitative approach.

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