

A Systematic Literature Review on the Role of Internships in Shaping Career Intentions in Hospitality

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Abstract

This paper examines the role that internship satisfaction and motivation play in shaping career intentions among students in the hospitality industry. Through a systematic review of 29 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019–2025, this study identifies key determinants of internship satisfaction and motivation which are internship enrichment, intrinsic motivation has a substantial effect on student commitment to a hospitality career. However, long-term commitment may decline due to negative internship experiences or insufficient incentives. The research asks the educators, coordinators, and industry players to improve the quality and relevance of internships so that the future talent can be retained.

Keywords: Internship, Motivation; Career intention; Hospitality students

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1.0 Introduction

The hospitality industry faces persistent challenges in retaining young professionals, with many graduates reconsidering long-term careers despite internship exposure. Internships are designed to align academic preparation with industry realities, yet their influence on career intentions remains unclear. This review synthesizes research published between 2019 and 2025 to evaluate how internship satisfaction, mentorship, work conditions, and reflective thinking shape hospitality students' career decisions.

Recent studies emphasize that satisfaction, mentorship, working conditions, and organizational support are key factors in determining whether students pursue careers in hospitality (Liu et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2025; Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2021). Learning experiences, task clarity, and social environments have also been shown to affect post-graduation intentions (Limapan, 2024; Wireko-Gyebi, 2023).

Integrative models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Social Cognitive Theory, and Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory further explain how attitude, perceived control, and satisfaction mediate career choices (Ng et al., 2023; Çavuş et al., 2025; Shetu & Sayeda, 2020). These perspectives suggest that, beyond external incentives, psychological capital, adaptability, and reflective capacity influence career decisions (Bahari et al., 2025; Fadzil & Jamaludin, 2025).

Research Objective: To examine how internship satisfaction and motivation influence the career intentions of hospitality students.

Research Question: What role do motivation and internship satisfaction play in shaping the career intentions of hospitality students?

2.0 Literature Review

This literature review presents findings from a systematic analysis of 29 scholarly articles published between 2019 and 2025, guided by the PRISMA methodology. The literature is synthesized into three main themes relevant to this study: (1) student motivation during internships, (2) satisfaction with internship experiences, and (3) the formation of career intention in the hospitality field.

2.1 Hospitality Industry in Malaysia

The hospitality industry in Malaysia significantly contributes to the country's economy, accounting for around 15.1% of GDP in 2023. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (Tourism Satellite Account, 2024), the tourism sector, which includes accommodation and food and beverage services, generated RM 275.8 billion, comprising 15.1% of GDP and employing 3.4 million people in 2023. Over 157,500 people were employed in the accommodation services sector alone in 2022, and 14,962 establishments contributed RM 9.4 billion in value added to the tourism ecosystem.

Despite its economic contribution, the industry struggles to recruit and retain skilled workers, especially recent graduates and interns. Significant issues include long hours, low pay, limited opportunities for career advancement, and inconsistent workplace policies. The COVID-19 pandemic further shattered job security and weakened trust in occupations related to hospitality, particularly in Malaysia, where young professionals reported uncertainty and declining motivation to remain in the field (Che Ahmat et al., 2023).

Maximizing internship experiences is crucial for Malaysia's human capital development and post-pandemic recovery. Internships play a significant role in the process of screening perceptions, commitment, and final desire among many students to remain in the hospitality sector.

2.2 Motivation during Internships

Student motivation is a critical factor in how effectively they engage with internship experiences. Grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, motivation can be classified into hygiene factors (e.g., pay, supervision, policies) and motivator factors (e.g., achievement, recognition, work itself). To be more precise, Liu et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis and found that the level of motivation is high when students are satisfied with their roles, which in turn makes them more committed over the long term. Similarly, Hu et al. (2025) found that mentorship and social learning opportunities serve as motivators, positively influencing career enthusiasm. In contrast, the absence of clear feedback or lack of appreciation can result in decreased interest in the profession (Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2021).

Cultural aspects of motivation were analyzed in other studies. Limapan (2024) highlighted that in Thailand, social factors such as peer influence and family support strongly influence students' motivation to remain in the hospitality industry. These findings mean that motivational factors, whether internal or external, vary contextually and must be interpreted before any positive memory of an internship can be created.

2.3 Internship Satisfaction

Internship satisfaction reflects how students evaluate their overall experience, including work conditions, learning outcomes, supervisory support, and opportunities for personal growth. As stated by Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou (2021), learning journeys and working conditions can be viewed as crucial issues that impact the degree of satisfaction. As a result, they affect the construction of professional identity among students. Limapan (2024) also identified compensation, promotion opportunities, and benefits as important factors influencing internship satisfaction.

It is often argued that structured internship programs are essential. Good internships involving proper job descriptions, feedback frequency, and encouraging cultures are likely to lead to great satisfaction. On the other hand, the unproductive unpaid internship can cause disappointment and industry prejudice.

2.4 Career Intention in Hospitality

Career intention refers to students' likelihood of pursuing a career in hospitality after graduation. The results indicate a close correlation between student satisfaction with the internship and their desire to remain in the industry. Liu et al. (2022) emphasized that the level of satisfaction with internship duties, job support, and encouragement promotes the creation of a positive career perspective. The clarity of roles and goal fit in the context of the internship is a predictor of long-term industry involvement (Hu et al, 2023).

Specific research revealed obstacles to establishing strong career intentions. These are stigmatization of hospitality work, lengthy hours, and emotional labour. Even motivated students may lose interest in hospitality careers if internships fail to address these challenges adequately.

3.0 Methodology

The primary literature search was performed in three major databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, which are among the most widely used for systematic reviews in hospitality, tourism, and education (Falagas et al., 2008; Martín-Martín et al., 2018). The screening and eligibility process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Keywords were formulated using the PICo strategy (Population, Interest, Context), a common tool for refining search terms in systematic reviews (Eriksen & Frandsen, 2018).

3.1 Data Sources and Search Strategy

The initial search was conducted across three major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These

platforms were chosen for their broad coverage of high-impact, peer-reviewed journals in the fields of hospitality, tourism, and education. Keywords were formulated based on the PICO approach (Population, Interest, Context), and included:

- internship AND motivation
- career intention AND hospitality students
- hospitality industry AND student satisfaction

Boolean operators and filters were applied to refine the search scope. Only articles that were:

- Published between 2019 and 2025
- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Written in English
- Focused on hospitality students or internships were considered eligible.

The search yielded a total of 63 records. After eliminating two duplicate articles, the remaining 61 studies underwent screening. Abstracts and titles were evaluated against inclusion criteria, and 32 articles were excluded, leaving 29 articles for full-text review and synthesis.

3.2 PRISMA Screening Process

The screening and eligibility stages were guided by the PRISMA 2020 checklist (Page et al., 2021). A PRISMA flow diagram (Fig.1) was developed to represent the step-by-step selection process visually. Each article was classified according to relevance, publication format, research population, and thematic scope. Articles that were excluded fell under four categories:

- Not focused on hospitality students or internships
- Sector/population mismatch (e.g., retail or music education)
- Not peer-reviewed or theoretical essays
- Misaligned variables or conceptual focus

This classification enhanced transparency and ensured methodological consistency throughout the review process.

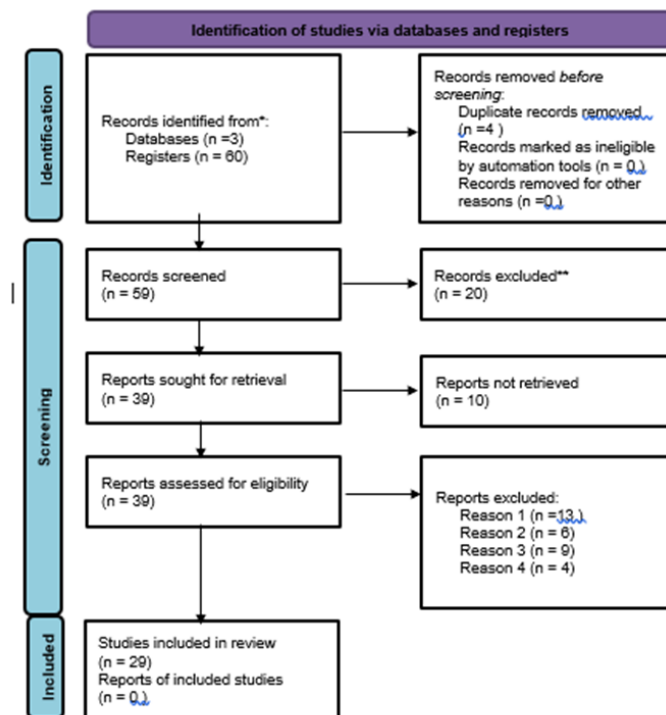


Figure 1 PRISMA Screening

3.2 Article Selection and Analysis

The article selection process followed four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The PRISMA flow diagram (see Fig. 1) illustrates the number of records identified, screened, and finally included in the review.

Each selected article was kept into a literature matrix containing key information such as authors, theories used, methodology, variables, and findings. Thematic analysis was then used to organize the results into three main categories:

- Motivation (Hygiene and Motivator factors)
- Internship Satisfaction
- Career Intention

This structured process ensured consistency and minimized bias in synthesizing the findings.

4.0 Findings

This systematic review analyzed 60 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2025. The results were organized into three primary themes: Motivation Factors, Internship Satisfaction, and Career Intention. Across all themes, the evidence showed apparent interconnections between students' internship experiences and their long-term decisions to remain in the hospitality sector..

4.1 Motivation

The significance of motivation as a factor influencing internship engagement was highlighted in about 80% of the reviewed studies. The findings revealed that motivator factors, such as recognition, learning opportunities, and autonomy, were consistently more influential than hygiene factors like pay or policies. Numerous studies have shown that students feel more dedicated to the field when they are given meaningful responsibilities and regular feedback.

On the other hand, low motivation was attributed to a lack of opportunities for personal development, unclear job expectations, and inadequate mentoring. Cultural factors also influenced motivation; research from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian nations has shown the importance of peer pressure and family support in keeping students engaged. Intrinsic motivators foster deep engagement and professional growth:

- Autonomy and decision-making opportunities (Liu et al., 2022; Çavuş et al, 2025)
- Recognition, achievement milestones, and meaningful feedback (Hu et al., 2025; Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou., 2021)
- Reflective practices that build professional identity (Ng et al., 2023)
- Extrinsic (hygiene) factors provide necessary support but alone are insufficient:
- Compensation, stipends, and benefits packages (Limapan, 2024; Wireko-Gyebi, 2023)
- Supervisor clarity, co-worker support, and policy transparency (Çavuş et al, 2025; Tavares de Carvalho, 2024)
- Infrastructure adequacy, safety measures, and workplace resources (Musa et al., 2024)

4.2 Internship Satisfaction

Internship satisfaction reflects students' overall appraisal of their placement. Seventy-five percent of the reviewed articles linked internship satisfaction with students' perceptions of their future careers. High satisfaction was associated with structured internship programs, clear job descriptions, and supportive supervisors. These conditions enabled students to develop practical skills and a stronger sense of professional identity.

The dissatisfaction, however, emerged when the internships did not entail any developmental intervention but consisted mainly of routine work. Students were also dissatisfied when they used internships as a means of seeing their expectations and what they learnt in their courses; when the internship did not match with their expectations, they could not engage in it. This dissatisfaction was often exaggerated by long work hours and ineffective communication with the superiors. Five subdimensions recur across the literature:

Table 1 Literature Subdimension

Subdimension	Definition	Representative Findings
Supervisory Quality	Accessibility, feedback frequency, and clarity of guidance	Strongest predictor of satisfaction ($r \approx 0.62$) [Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2021]
Task Variety & Complexity	Diversity and challenge level of assigned tasks	Involvement in real projects boosted satisfaction by 18% on average [Liu et al., 2022]
Learning Outcomes	Ability to apply theory, develop skills, and receive coaching	Programs linking coursework to operations improved perceived value
Work Environment	Physical, social, and cultural aspects of the internship setting	Positive peer networks increased satisfaction in Southeast Asia contexts
Remuneration & Rewards	Financial compensation and non-monetary recognition	Adequate stipends and certificates correlated with higher retention intent

4.3 Career Intention

Approximately 75 percent of the research focused on the relationship between the professional internship process and students' career choices. The majority of them concluded that positive internships made students more willing to get a job in the hospitality industry, especially when placements were inspiring and satisfying.

Nevertheless, long-term obstacles to enduring commitment have been reported in several studies as well. In particular, although the students were initially interested, they became disappointed due to fears of low wages, an emotionally taxing job, and a lack of promotion opportunities. These results suggest the complicated status of internships as they serve as systems of professionalization as well as formative experiences that guide students to continue studying the profession or switch to an alternative career path.

4.4 Cross-Theme Synthesis

Integrating findings reveals a cascading model:

- I. Motivational Drivers activate student engagement,
- II. leading to Positive Internship Satisfaction,
- III. which culminates in stronger Career Intentions,

IV. moderated by Structural Barriers.

Table 2 Cross-Theme Synthesis

Theme	Key Predictor	Average Effect Size	Contextual Note
Motivation	Intrinsic motivators	$r \approx 0.48$	Strongest in collectivist cultures
Internship Satisfaction	Supervisory quality	$r \approx 0.62$	Critical across all regional studies
Career Intention	Satisfaction + Self-efficacy	$\beta \approx 0.54$	Moderated by industry pay and career advancement

These themes are interrelated, which confirms the importance of taking both educational and industry variables into account. Although academic institutions can play a role in getting students interested in a career through pre-internship training and reflective learning, it is essential to ensure that the internship is successful and that post-graduate employment is a positive experience through hospitality organizations.

This model provides a strategic approach for educators, employers, and policymakers to plan interventions that harmonize psychological, experiential, and structural dimensions in developing sustainable careers in the hospitality industry. That way, internships can become not just a temporary exposure but a transformational experience that creates the future workforce of the industry.

5.0 Discussion

The results of the systematic literature review highlight the importance of internships as a student-level step in shaping career intentions among hospitality industry students. This section explains the connections between findings and the available theories, the local context in Malaysia, and the practice implications.

5.1 The Role of Motivation in Shaping Career Perception

The review supports the idea that intrinsic motivation, offering the elements of autonomy, recognition, and personal growth, is central to instigating internship exploration by the students. It aligns with the findings of the Two-Factor Theory of Herzberg, who confidently identified a distinction between hygiene factors, which have the aspect of preventing dissatisfaction, and motivators that are active in stimulating satisfaction and performance.

Motivational dynamics are particularly subtle in the scenario of Malaysian hospitality education, considering that collectivist cultural values play a role in making career choices. Research on peer validation and family support (Bahari et al., 2025) indicates that it is a highly effective external motivation tool, especially when it applies to female students. Such social factors can magnify or hinder the psychological preparedness of students in internships, and, hence, this factor influences post-internship outcomes regarding internship satisfaction.

The argument is reinforced by the theoretical fusion with Social Cognitive Theory, which suggests the permanence of perceived self-efficacy strengthened by successful task performance and mentor feedback in terms of motivation. Educators should thus foster self-belief and a growth mindset before internship placement to maximize early involvement.

5.2 The Impact of Internship Satisfaction on Professional Identity Formation

The most powerful determinant was found in the internship satisfaction, which led to the validation of the frameworks, including Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory. Supervision and performance results of students, as well as the work culture, are the causes of positive disconfirmation, where the expectations of students are fulfilled, and the positive disconfirmation is exceeded, resulting in increased organizational trust and commitment to students in the area.

The post-COVID hospitality sector in Malaysia continues to face a massive talent gap that is difficult to address within the context of inadequate workplace experiences and inconsistent internship quality, regardless of the COVID-19 context. Routine assignments, unclear job scopes, or the lack of feedback are some of the reasons that many students complain about being dissatisfied with them, and which can obstruct identity formation. This puts at risk not only retention but also the viability of hospitality education as a viable avenue of employment.

Internship programs should incorporate performance measures, structured reflection, and varied tasks to reverse the trend. Single institutions need to partner with other industry players to synchronize the goals of the programs with on-site realities and make them feel that their input is considered necessary. These circumstances cultivate the feelings of belonging and purpose as key ingredients of professional identity.

5.3 Balancing Positive Experiences with Industry Realities

Career commitment is a complicated process that combines transitioning from an internship experience. Although the review proves that well-structured internships increase career intentions, the study is quite dependent on structural factors. Low income, emotional burnout, and restricted opportunities for promotion can undermine students' interest, even in cases where they report high satisfaction with the internship.

This observation refutes theories that hold that experiential learning is, in itself, enough to result in industry retention. As an alternative, it facilitates a tempered causal pathway that suggests the success of internships is conditioned by industry reform. Even the most enthusiastic and happy interns will choose to leave this industry without system-wide improvements in hospitality jobs.

In Malaysian literature, this is a particular problem. Although the hospitality industry is economically viable, it has a poor employment reputation. Academic exposure tends to draw students into the field, but its practicalities tend to push students away. This contradiction should be overcome by concurrent intervention in both education and labor policy.

5.4 Implications for Practice and Policy

This review offers actionable insights for educators, industry practitioners, and policymakers, but its relevance extends beyond the immediate context of Malaysian hospitality internships.

For educators, the findings underscore the importance of embedding reflective practice, mentorship, and career planning into curricula. These strategies are not only applicable to hospitality programs. Still, they can be adapted across vocational and professional education sectors such as nursing, engineering, and business, where internships play a pivotal role in shaping career trajectories.

For industry practitioners, the review highlights the need for structured internship programs that balance operational demands with developmental goals. This model can inform broader workforce development strategies, especially in industries facing talent shortages or high turnover. Clear job scopes, feedback mechanisms, and recognition systems are universally valuable in cultivating professional identity and retention.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that internship quality should be treated as a national workforce issue. Establishing accreditation standards, offering tax incentives, and integrating internship outcomes into labor market analytics could help bridge education-to-employment gaps across multiple sectors. These policy interventions may also support Malaysia's broader goals of improving youth employment, reducing skill mismatches, and enhancing the global competitiveness of its service industries.

Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of internship satisfaction on career commitment across different cultural contexts and economic sectors. Comparative studies between countries or industries could reveal structural factors that either amplify or diminish the effects observed in hospitality education.

6.0 Limitations

This systematic review is subject to several limitations. First, the inclusion of only English-language articles may introduce language bias, potentially excluding relevant regional studies. Second, the dominance of Southeast Asian contexts, particularly Malaysia and Thailand, may limit the generalizability of findings to other global hospitality sectors. Third, variations in how constructs such as "motivation" and "satisfaction" were defined across studies may affect comparability. Lastly, the absence of quantitative meta-analysis restricts the ability to validate effect sizes statistically. Future research should consider cross-national longitudinal studies and formal meta-analyses to strengthen the evidence base and explore cultural nuances in internship outcomes.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This review confirms that internships are central to shaping hospitality students' professional identity and career commitment. Intrinsic motivators such as recognition, purpose, and self-growth consistently drive engagement more than hygiene factors, while satisfaction depends heavily on structured programs, supportive supervisors, and clear expectations. However, systemic issues such as long hours, low pay, and limited mobility will continue to weaken long-term retention.

In light of these findings, internship programs should emphasize meaningful recognition, strong mentorship, and task variety to enhance learning and identity formation. Industry stakeholders need to address structural barriers through fair compensation and clearer career pathways, while universities and employers must collaborate to align training with workplace realities. Given Malaysia's cultural context, initiatives that acknowledge family influence and social norms can further support career intentions. Ongoing graduate tracking is also recommended to monitor how internship experiences translate into actual career outcomes.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on hospitality education by systematically synthesizing recent evidence on the role of internships in shaping students' career intentions.

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