

SUSTAINING A CHEF CAREER DURING COVID-19: CHALLENGES FROM THE KLANG VALLEY LUXURY HOTEL SECTOR

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic deeply disrupted the hospitality industry, with chefs among the most affected due to restaurant closures, changing workplace protocols, and job insecurity. This study investigates the career-related challenges faced by sous chefs working in 4- and 5-star hotels in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Drawing from complexity theory and career shock theory, the research uses a qualitative case study approach, gathering insights through in-depth interviews. The findings centre around four interconnected themes: irregular salary payments, the looming threat of retrenchment, overwhelming workloads, and restricted work movement. Many chefs experienced substantial pay cuts, unpaid leave, or were let go entirely. Those who stayed on had to take on additional roles and responsibilities, often with fewer team members and shorter working hours. Beyond the physical strain, evolving health protocols and travel restrictions added another layer of disruption to their routines. Taken together, these findings reveal how systemic crises can magnify personal and professional vulnerabilities. By framing these experiences through a theoretical lens, this study adds to the broader understanding of career shocks in hospitality and offers practical considerations for supporting culinary professionals in future health emergencies.

Keywords: *chef career, COVID-19, complexity theory, Klang Valley, luxury hotel*

Introduction

The hospitality industry is a vital contributor to the global economy, providing employment opportunities and driving economic development across many regions. However, because of its service-based and labour-intensive nature, the sector is particularly exposed to external shocks, including pandemics and natural disasters. When the World Health Organization officially classified COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, countries worldwide were forced to introduce emergency public health measures (WHO, 2020). In Malaysia, this came in the form of the Movement Control Order (MCO), implemented on 18 March 2020. As part of this directive, non-essential sectors such as tourism and hospitality were temporarily shut down (Elengoe, 2020; Shah et al., 2020). This sudden operational halt created deep disruptions in the hotel industry, with the food and beverage departments among the hardest hit. Reports from the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) revealed that over 60% of 4-and 5-star hotels faced major operational constraints, and close to 100 hotels across all categories permanently closed by 2021. These closures had a ripple effect on the employment landscape for chefs, many of whom saw their kitchens shuttered or reduced to minimal staffing. The impact was severe: salary deductions, forced unpaid leave, and retrenchment became all too common (Foo et al., 2020; Karim and Haque, 2020). Although there is a body of research that addresses occupational stress in culinary professions (Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007), only a limited number of studies have looked specifically at the experiences of chefs during the

COVID-19 crisis, especially within the Malaysian context. Most existing literature tends to generalise crisis effects across the broader hospitality workforce, often neglecting the unique pressures faced by chefs. A recent study by Bucak and Yiğit (2021) noted a loss of motivation among chefs triggered by job instability and health concerns, but the voices of chefs in Southeast Asia remain largely underrepresented in this discourse.

To better grasp these challenges, complexity theory provides a useful framework. It offers a way to examine how crises like pandemics produce unexpected disruptions through the interaction of various systems and actors. In complex situations, outcomes are rarely linear or predictable (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019; Zahra and Ryan, 2007). While complexity theory has been applied in tourism and disaster studies, it has rarely been paired with qualitative investigations into how culinary professionals respond to evolving crises (Japutra and Situmorang, 2021). This opens an important avenue for further research. Gaining deeper insights into these lived experiences is critical for a range of stakeholders. Hotel managers, policymakers, and educators can benefit from understanding how crises reshape culinary careers. These findings can guide the development of more resilient employment strategies and help embed crisis preparedness into culinary training programmes. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate the career-related challenges faced by sous chefs working in 4- and 5-star hotels in Malaysia's Klang Valley during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it seeks to capture their first-hand experiences and interpret them through the lens of complexity theory. By doing so, the study addresses a notable gap in the literature and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how crises impact culinary professionals within the luxury hotel sector.

Literature review

The impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry

The global hospitality sector was among the industries most severely affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Malaysia, the introduction of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020 brought tourism-related operations, including hotels and restaurants, to a standstill (Elengoe, 2020; Shah et al., 2020). According to reports from the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH), more than 60 percent of 4- and 5-star hotels faced substantial operational disruption, especially within their food and beverage departments. By 2021, nearly 100 hotels had permanently closed their doors. These shutdowns triggered a wave of consequences, including pay cuts, retrenchments, and downsizing of hotel operations. Chefs and other kitchen staff were among those most directly impacted, as they encountered uncertainty, shifting responsibilities, and evolving work expectations under highly constrained conditions (Foo et al., 2020). While these Malaysian figures highlight the severity of the crisis, studies from other regions have also captured comparable impacts on the hospitality workforce. For instance, Baum et al. (2020) argue that the pandemic amplified long-standing vulnerabilities in hospitality work, particularly precarious employment conditions across macro, meso, and micro levels. Their analysis underscores how systemic instability was exposed and intensified during the pandemic, especially in urban hospitality clusters. However, despite this broader focus, there remains limited attention to the food production side of hotel operations, leaving a gap in understanding how culinary staff, such as chefs, were uniquely affected by operational shutdowns and evolving health protocols.

Career challenges in the culinary profession

The work environment for chefs has long been associated with intense pressure, long hours, and high expectations. However, the pandemic introduced a new layer of complexity to an already demanding profession. Challenges such as salary reductions, unpaid leave, and staff retrenchments became widespread, while chefs who remained employed were often expected to manage multiple roles due to skeletal staffing (Foo et al., 2020). Social distancing guidelines, compulsory personal protective equipment (PPE), and evolving standard operating procedures (SOPs) added physical and mental strain. Communication gaps between hotel management and staff made matters worse, leaving many chefs feeling insecure about their positions. Previous study observed that chefs frequently reported a loss of motivation and elevated anxiety, especially the fear of bringing the virus home to their families. These pressures contributed to emotional burnout and diminished engagement in their work. Although recent studies highlight the psychological consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on hotel employees, including anxiety and job insecurity, much of this literature remains focused on individual-level outcomes rather than systemic or structural factors. For example, Aguiar-Quintana et al. (2021) found that job insecurity significantly increased anxiety and depression among hotel workers, but did not explore how organisational shortcomings, such as unclear HR communication or lack of institutional support might contribute to these outcomes. Moreover, little is known about how such issues manifest specifically among culinary professionals, whose roles involve unique stressors and operational complexities. Comparative research across countries with differing lockdown intensities is also limited, leaving questions about how national policy responses influenced chefs' working conditions during the pandemic.

Career shock and occupational stress in crisis situations

The disruption brought about by the pandemic has been described as a “career shock,” a term referring to a sudden, uncontrollable event that prompts individuals to reassess their career trajectory (Akkermans et al., 2018). Within the culinary field, this disruption was felt through sudden job losses, changes in workload, and inconsistent work schedules. The structured and hierarchical environment of professional kitchens made these abrupt transitions especially difficult to navigate. Chefs had to quickly adjust to unfamiliar responsibilities, reduced hours, and temporary closures, often with little to no guidance or emotional support. The unpredictability of lockdowns and lack of clear messaging from employers added to the confusion and disempowerment experienced by many. Stress levels among chefs grew more intense as they worked under increased pressure, frequently in understaffed kitchens. Xiong et al. (2020) noted a widespread rise in mental health concerns across service industries during the pandemic, and the food sector was certainly not immune. Ereno et al. (2014) had already highlighted challenges such as fluctuating shifts and unstable income prior to the crisis, and these difficulties were only amplified in its aftermath. The combination of physical fatigue, emotional strain, and financial instability placed chefs in a vulnerable position, demanding new approaches to foster resilience and well-being in the profession. While the concept of career shock is now well-established (Akkermans et al., 2018), much of the empirical research in this area tends to focus on white-collar professionals and knowledge workers, often using quantitative survey methods. This

focus limits the applicability of findings to blue-collar and service sector occupations, such as chefs, whose career paths are often shaped by informal networks, hands-on expertise, and non-linear progressions. Furthermore, the emotional complexities and subjective meaning of career disruptions, particularly in sectors like hospitality, are not always captured through quantitative designs, pointing to the value of qualitative approaches in advancing this literature.

Applying complexity theory in crisis management

Complexity theory offers a compelling framework for understanding the unpredictable and interconnected challenges that surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally used in systems thinking, this theory views crises as dynamic situations shaped by multiple variables and stakeholders whose interactions produce unexpected outcomes (Zahra and Ryan, 2007). In this context, complexity theory helps make sense of how public health directives, business continuity pressures, emotional responses, and institutional decisions all came together to affect the hospitality workforce. Zenker and Kock (2020) described the pandemic as both a public health emergency and an economic disaster, highlighting the difficulty in applying linear planning models to such a unique event. Despite its relevance, complexity theory has not been widely applied in hospitality studies that explore human experience, particularly through qualitative lenses. Ritchie and Jiang (2019) argued that the theory allows researchers to uncover hidden patterns in how people, policies, and environments interact during times of disruption. Within Malaysian hotels, the lived experiences of chefs demonstrated this complexity. While some chefs were overwhelmed with extra duties, others were left jobless, and these outcomes often shifted as government SOPs evolved. By adopting complexity theory, this study frames these experiences not as isolated incidents, but as part of a broader, interconnected system that challenges traditional approaches to crisis management in hospitality. Despite its potential, complexity theory has often been applied at a macro-policy level rather than within individual or team-level occupational settings. While Ritchie and Jiang (2019) provide a comprehensive review of tourism crisis research, there remains a noticeable gap in studies that explore how frontline hospitality workers experience complexity, particularly through qualitative approaches. Furthermore, while complexity theory helps explain system-level disruption, it does not always provide actionable guidance for organisations trying to support employee well-being. This limitation makes it necessary to complement the theory with grounded, context-specific insights such as those emerging from sous chefs' lived experiences.

Materials and Methods

This study applied a qualitative research design, adopting a case study approach to explore the challenges faced by chefs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative method was selected to provide a deeper understanding of how chefs experienced and made sense of the crisis in real-life settings. Case study methodology, in particular, offered a valuable means of generating rich, contextual insights, especially within the structured environment of luxury hotel kitchens in Klang Valley, Malaysia. By focusing on this specific context, the research aimed to examine the complexity of the situation in a way that quantitative designs might not capture. To ensure relevant perspectives were captured, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who were in a strong

position to share meaningful experiences. The study centred on sous chefs employed at 4-and 5-star hotels in Klang Valley. These individuals were chosen based on their managerial responsibilities in kitchen operations and their extensive experience in the culinary field. Inclusion criteria required participants to be Malaysian citizens, to have worked in the hotel industry for at least three years, and to be employed in a hotel kitchen during the pandemic period. These criteria were established to ensure that the participants had direct exposure to the operational and emotional pressures caused by the Movement Control Orders (MCO).

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews conducted online, using video conferencing platforms. This format was chosen due to the health restrictions and mobility limitations in place during the data collection period. The interview guide was developed in line with the study's objectives and was reviewed by academic supervisors to ensure clarity and relevance. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences related to employment, workload, job security, work environment, and personal well-being during the height of the pandemic. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Each recording was transcribed verbatim to prepare the data for analysis. Thematic analysis was then used to identify recurring patterns and underlying dimensions within the interview data. Coding was done manually and discussed between the researcher and academic supervisor to maintain consistency and depth in interpretation. Several strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, including data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Throughout the research process, the principle of reflexivity was maintained, with the researcher remaining aware of potential biases and personal influences. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board, and all participants were informed about their rights, including the option to withdraw, confidentiality of their responses, and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of interviews with sous chefs working in Klang Valley luxury hotels revealed four major dimensions reflecting the challenges faced in sustaining their careers during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) inconsistency of salary payment, (2) potential work retrenchment, (3) unbearable workload, and (4) unusual restricted work movement. These dimensions illustrate the interconnected effects of a crisis environment, aligning with complexity theory, which frames such disruptions as non-linear, multifaceted, and contextually bound phenomena (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019; Zahra and Ryan, 2007). These four challenges were further broken down into specific subdimensions that offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges experienced by sous chefs during the pandemic. *Table 1* shows a summary of the challenges and their corresponding dimensions, which collectively illustrate the layered and interdependent nature of career disruptions in crisis contexts.

Table 1. Dimensions and subdimensions of career challenges faced by Sous Chefs in Klang Valley luxury hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges dimension	Subdimension
Inconsistency of Salary Payment	1. Salary deduction 2. Unpaid salary
Potential Work Retrenchment	1. Offered Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS) 2. Unpaid leave

	3. Retrenchment
Unbearable Workload	1. Multiple task assignments 2. Insufficient manpower 3. Reduced working hours
Unusual Restricted Work Movement	1. Requirement of travel letter for inter-state/regional movement 2. Social distancing regulation 3. Thermal discomfort due to PPE

Dimension 1: Inconsistency of salary payment

One of the key challenges reported by sous chefs during the COVID-19 pandemic was the inconsistency of salary payment. This dimension consists of two components: (1) salary deduction and (2) unpaid salary. These financial changes not only affected chefs' income stability but also influenced their motivation, trust in management, and perception of job security.

Salary deduction

Salary deduction was a common financial adjustment imposed by hotel management during the pandemic, particularly during the early stages of Movement Control Orders (MCO). One participant explained how these deductions began as the situation worsened:

"In the beginning, the salary was as usual, but when the cases increased, the hotel started to deduct 30% of the salary....and at the same time reduce the number of employees.." (P2)

The deduction trend continued in some establishments over several months. Another sous chef recalled:

"...the hotel made an announcement to cut salaries by 50%...but in 3 to 4 months...management decided to continue cutting salaries up to 70%....and management decided to retrench the lower level employees, like commis..." (P8)

These narratives reflect how salary adjustments were progressively implemented without clear timelines or recovery plans. The simultaneous reduction in workforce and salaries added further pressure on those who remained. This reflects findings by Foo et al. (2020), who documented widespread payroll disruptions in Malaysian hotels during the pandemic. Additionally, the emotional strain caused by financial insecurity aligns with Xiong et al. (2020), who reported heightened stress among frontline service employees experiencing income shocks.

Unpaid salary

In some cases, the situation escalated from salary deductions to complete suspension of salary payments, particularly in hotels that were unable to generate revenue. A participant spoke about peers in non-luxury hotels:

"Most of my friends who are not working in 4- or 5-star hotels....the hotel knows that they cannot survive and decide not to pay the salary....the reason is because the bills still have to be paid....." (P4)

Another chef reflected on the management's strategy of withholding salaries from senior staff first:

“The management decided not to pay the salary for upper level first before directly dismissing the subordinates...they are so clever...” (P9)

These experiences illustrate a pattern of selective financial decision-making, where certain groups bore the brunt of cost-cutting measures. From the lens of complexity theory, such decisions reveal the uneven consequences of crisis responses within hierarchical organisations (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019). Additionally, the unpredictability of salary arrangements contributed to what Akkermans et al. (2018) describe as career shock, disruptive events that force individuals to reconsider their occupational path and stability. Overall, the inconsistency in salary payments represented more than just financial hardship. It revealed gaps in crisis planning, lack of empathetic communication, and managerial strategies that disproportionately affected mid-level culinary professionals. These findings call for the development of structured salary protection protocols in future crisis management plans for the hospitality sector.

Dimension 2: Potential work retrenchment

The second key dimension that emerged from the findings was potential work retrenchment. The sous chefs interviewed shared concerns over the various cost-saving strategies implemented by their hotels, which threatened their job security and created a tense working atmosphere. This dimension consists of three related components: offered Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS), unpaid leave, and retrenchment. These measures were implemented at different stages, contributing to an ongoing sense of instability and uncertainty within the workplace.

Offered Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS)

Several participants reported that their hotels introduced a Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS) during the early months of the pandemic. While the initiative was positioned as voluntary, many chefs viewed it as an indirect method to reduce staff numbers while avoiding compulsory termination. One participant explained.

“In May 2020 our hotel start offer VSS for selected staff only...the main criteria is staff that worked more than 5 years.” (P3)

This suggests that longer-serving employees were the primary targets, likely due to their higher salary commitments. The decision to offer VSS to senior employees reflects a strategic move by hotel management to balance operational costs without triggering outright layoffs. However, the impact on morale was significant, especially as those who remained witnessed experienced colleagues leaving the organisation. This finding supports Foo et al. (2020), who demonstrated that hotels across Malaysia adopted VSS and other downsizing strategies during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period. From a complexity theory perspective, this measure illustrates how hotels responded to the interdependencies between financial pressure, labour costs, and business continuity in non-linear ways (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019). While intended to reduce cost, the offer of

VSS inadvertently created a climate of fear and demotivation among remaining employees.

Unpaid leave

In some hotels, unpaid leave was introduced as an interim solution before more permanent decisions like VSS or retrenchment were made. This left many chefs in limbo, unsure whether they would return to work or be officially dismissed. One sous chef described this sequence.

“...start with unpaid leave then management decided to retrench...” (P2)

This pattern highlights the uncertainty and lack of transparent communication that characterised the pandemic response in many hotel kitchens. Chefs placed on unpaid leave were effectively disconnected from their workplaces without formal termination, which delayed their ability to seek new employment or access financial support mechanisms. As noted by Xiong et al. (2020), uncertainty surrounding employment status is a critical driver of psychological stress during crisis events. For the sous chefs in this study, unpaid leave not only disrupted income flow but also undermined their professional identity and stability.

Retrenchment

Eventually, some chefs observed or experienced retrenchment directly. The selection criteria for retrenchment appeared to favour length of service, with newer employees being let go first. One participant stated.

“Only staff who work less than 2 years will retrench.” (P1)

This approach was likely seen as less disruptive to long-term operations, yet it reinforced perceptions of expendability among junior staff. While the sous chefs themselves were generally retained due to their mid-management roles, the retrenchment of commis and junior team members placed additional emotional and operational strain on them. These reductions not only disrupted team cohesion but also affected workload distribution, as fewer staff were available to support daily operations. The threat and reality of retrenchment reflect what career shock theory describes as externally induced events that disrupt normal career progression and force individuals to re-evaluate their employment future (Akkermans et al., 2018). In the context of this study, sous chefs were not merely concerned about others being laid off, they internalised those events as signals of their own professional vulnerability. Complexity theory helps to contextualise how such decisions, although structured around organisational survival, generated unpredictable ripple effects that influenced team morale, staff performance, and career planning in interrelated ways (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019; Zahra and Ryan, 2007). In summary, potential work retrenchment during COVID-19 was not experienced as a single event but as a sequence of escalating actions, beginning with VSS, followed by unpaid leave, and culminating in retrenchment. These changes led to emotional strain, financial worry, and a destabilised sense of professional security for the chefs who remained. The findings highlight the

urgent need for transparent retrenchment policies and emotional support strategies within the hotel industry during times of crisis.

Dimension 3: Unbearable workload

The third challenge experienced by sous chefs during the COVID-19 pandemic was the unbearable workload caused by staff reductions and adjusted work schedules. While some chefs were retrenched or placed on unpaid leave, those who remained employed faced increased responsibilities due to the downsized workforce and restricted operating hours. This dimension comprises three components: multiple task assignments, insufficient manpower, and reduced working hours, which collectively created a stressful, physically demanding, and emotionally exhausting work environment.

Multiple task assignments

A prominent challenge shared by several sous chefs was the requirement to perform multiple tasks across different sections of the kitchen. Due to a leaner workforce, many chefs had to take over the roles of their absent colleagues, often without any formal redistribution of responsibilities or compensation. One participant shared.

“...each chef need to cover two to three sections in one shift...” (P2)

This multitasking situation created operational inefficiencies, fatigue, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Chefs accustomed to managing specific kitchen stations had to adapt quickly to unfamiliar roles, which affected the consistency and quality of food preparation. These findings reflect the work of Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons (2007), who noted that role overload and multitasking are common sources of stress among kitchen professionals even in non-crisis settings. Under pandemic conditions, the pressure to multitask intensified, pushing many chefs to their limits both mentally and physically.

Insufficient manpower

Beyond multitasking, the shortage of manpower emerged as a core issue affecting day-to-day operations. Participants described working in significantly reduced teams, resulting in uneven task distribution and heightened pressure during service hours. One chef explained.

“Only 5-6 staff covered the whole kitchen department in one shift.” (P3)

This scenario reflects the operational downsizing implemented by many hotels during MCO. The skeletal crew arrangements increased dependency on each remaining staff member, leading to long hours of continuous labour and limited opportunities for rest. Chefs were forced to prioritise speed over precision, further exacerbating the pressure to meet service standards. This condition resonates with findings by Foo et al. (2020), who emphasised workforce constraints as a major burden during the pandemic, particularly in hotels operating at minimal capacity. From a complexity theory lens, such scenarios demonstrate how a reduction in one variable (staff count) causes unpredictable strain on other interconnected systems like food quality, service timing, and staff wellbeing (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019).

Reduced working hours

While chefs were handling more responsibilities with fewer colleagues, they were simultaneously expected to complete their work within reduced operating hours. This paradox created an unsustainable work rhythm. One participant described.

“...the number of workers had been cut down, but our working hour were also reduced, which made us have no choice but to do fast work and be physically tired.”
(P7)

The mismatch between workload and available time further added to their exhaustion and frustration. Not only were chefs being asked to do more with less support, but they also had less time in which to complete their work. This issue illustrates the fragmented decision-making common during crises, where cost-saving measures are applied without considering the broader operational consequences. Complexity theory helps frame this dynamic by explaining how overlapping constraints, staffing, time, and productivity, interact in unstable and non-linear ways during crises (Zahra and Ryan, 2007). In essence, unbearable workload among sous chefs during COVID-19 was the result of interconnected stressors that magnified one another. The combination of multitasking, staff shortages, and reduced work hours formed a feedback loop of fatigue and low morale. These conditions not only jeopardised employee wellbeing but also threatened the integrity of kitchen operations and long-term retention of skilled culinary professionals.

Unusual restricted work movement

The fourth dimension highlights the unique and unfamiliar restrictions imposed on chefs' movement and physical environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures, while necessary for public health, created new layers of operational and psychological challenges for those working in kitchen environments. This dimension comprises three components: (1) requirement of travel letter for cross inter-state/inter-regional movement, (2) applying social distancing regulation, and (3) thermal discomfort due to personal protective equipment (PPE).

Requirement of travel letter for cross inter-state/inter-regional movement

One of the most immediate impacts on sous chefs was the need to carry and present official letters when travelling to work, particularly across district or state lines. This became a daily necessity due to roadblocks and police inspections. One participant explained.

“There are roadblocks everywhere and we had to show letters just to come to work and for cross-district travel.” (P1)

This requirement introduced logistical disruptions and a new kind of pressure, ensuring one's documentation was updated and accepted. For chefs whose schedules were already tight, delays at roadblocks and the psychological toll of being monitored during essential travel compounded daily stress. Shah et al. (2020) noted that the implementation of Malaysia's Movement Control Orders significantly affected worker

mobility. From a complexity theory standpoint, these travel constraints demonstrate how external health regulations became entangled with individual work routines, creating ripple effects across even the most routine aspects of employment (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019).

Applying social distancing regulation

Beyond mobility, chefs also had to comply with enforced social distancing measures within the kitchen space. For many, this disrupted the normal workflow and collaborative nature of kitchen operations. One sous chef described the impact on team interaction and space management.

“The chefs’ working environment were not the same anymore... we must comply with the social distancing rules... It feels very distant and cold...” (P6)

Working in a kitchen typically demands high levels of close coordination and teamwork. The introduction of distancing protocols altered these dynamics, making communication less fluid and reducing the sense of camaraderie. These findings reflect the psychological disruption that Zenker and Kock (2020) associated with health regulations in service industries, where relational work environments were replaced by procedural isolation. For chefs, such distancing was not only physical but also emotional, reducing opportunities for peer support and informal teamwork during an already stressful period.

Thermal discomfort (PPE: Mask and Glove)

The final component of this dimension centres on the physical discomfort caused by the mandatory use of PPE, particularly face masks and gloves during long working hours in hot kitchen environments. Sous chefs reported significant thermal stress and breathing difficulties while complying with these regulations. One participant stated:

“It’s a routine to wear mask and gloves every time we come to work... it’s hard to breathe wearing a mask for long hours.” (P6)

This discomfort added a new layer of strain to an already demanding physical job. Unlike front-of-house roles, kitchen work involves exposure to high temperatures, continuous movement, and precise manual tasks. Wearing PPE in such a setting not only caused physical exhaustion but also affected concentration and performance. According to complexity theory, this is an example of how safety-focused interventions introduced during a crisis can create unexpected burdens in other operational domains (Zahra and Ryan, 2007). What began as a health precaution evolved into a source of occupational stress, especially for culinary professionals who rely on physical dexterity and constant mobility. In summary, unusual restricted work movement during the pandemic imposed a set of new constraints on sous chefs’ professional routines. The requirement of travel documents, enforcement of social distancing, and use of PPE collectively transformed the physical and emotional terrain of the kitchen. These adaptations, while externally mandated, deeply influenced chefs’ performance, comfort, and wellbeing, reinforcing the need for holistic, staff-centred crisis responses in hospitality settings.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges experienced by sous chefs in 4-and 5-star hotels in Klang Valley during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their lived experiences of navigating work instability, evolving roles, and environmental disruptions. Using a qualitative case study approach, four key dimensions were identified: inconsistency of salary payment, potential work retrenchment, unbearable workload, and unusual restricted work movement. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of how mid-level culinary professionals were affected not only financially and physically but also emotionally and psychologically throughout the crisis. The complex interplay of individual stress, organisational decisions, and government regulations reflects the layered reality of working in hospitality during a time of global disruption. The study confirms that career shocks experienced by chefs were not isolated incidents but systemic and multifaceted disruptions that affected daily functioning and long-term career outlook. Participants encountered abrupt salary deductions, retrenchment threats, and increasingly demanding workloads, all within the context of physical mobility constraints and workplace safety regulations. These experiences align with the tenets of career shock theory, which posits that external, uncontrollable events can cause professionals to reassess their career paths and stability (Akkermans et al., 2018). The findings also reinforce the relevance of complexity theory, as they demonstrate how dynamic, non-linear interactions between public policy, hotel management decisions, and employee wellbeing created unpredictable work conditions that chefs had to continuously adapt to.

From a practical perspective, the study underscores the urgent need for hospitality employers to establish crisis-resilient human resource (HR) strategies that are transparent, empathetic, and staff-focused. Hotels must develop clear protocols for salary adjustment, internal communication, and workload distribution during emergencies, ensuring that financial mitigation efforts do not disproportionately burden kitchen-level staff. Mental health support mechanisms and flexible retrenchment alternatives, such as rotational work or redeployment, could help retain talent and sustain morale. Additionally, future crisis management plans should integrate feedback from all operational levels, especially mid-level chefs who serve as a bridge between management and ground-level staff. Academically, this research contributes to the limited body of literature on chefs' career experiences during health-related crises, particularly within the Malaysian context. While much of the existing scholarship has focused on hotel business continuity or tourism recovery, this study adds an occupational lens that centres the voice of the culinary workforce. The findings call for further research into post-pandemic career recovery among chefs, including longitudinal studies on retention, mental health, and re-skilling. They also open avenues for theory development by applying complexity thinking to hospitality HR, encouraging scholars to look beyond linear problem-solution models and explore adaptive, holistic approaches to managing workforce resilience in future crises.

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Conflict of interest

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

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