

**The Lived Experience of Hospitality Workers Furloughed  
During the COVID-19 Shutdown**

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## **Literature Review**

Research in hospitality employment has predominately focused on employee sentiment and retention, with many conducted using surveys or quantitative methodologies. The factors or variables often considered in the literature include job satisfaction, absenteeism, work commitment, turnover (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2020). The layoff of hospitality employees during the COVID-19 shutdown and the experience of changing careers and the eventual return to the hospitality field have not been discussed in the current literature. Research studies using narrative inquiry presenting the lived experience of hospitality employees during the COVID-19 shutdown were not found in the existing literature.

Episodic narrative inquiry is a qualitative analysis methodology characterized by targeted and focused storytelling. The format "reduces a participant's cognitive load" (Mueller, 2019, p. 5) by providing a framework to focus the account on what they perceive as relevant to their experience. The selective nature of this type of inquiry reveals valuable insight into the reality experienced by the participants (Griffin, 2018). In his 2005 book, Isopahkala-Bouret explains that "narrative thinking synthesizes separate entities into a holistic meaning structure, whereas the analytical mind cuts, compares, and categorizes entities" (p. 38). A narrative inquiry should provide opportunities to interpret behavior or decision-making involved in returning to careers in the hospitality sector, specifically in the context of a unique situation, the COVID-19 shutdown.

In addressing the experience of hospitality workers during the COVID-19 shutdown, a handful of studies centered around employees who remained engaged in the field. Most studies were interested in the impact of work conditions during the pandemic on employees'

attitudes and work intentions. For example, the different effects of COVID-19 on work-related attitudes (WRAs) of job motivation, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions of employees were considered. Results indicated that job insecurity was a strong predictor of WRAs and turnover intention. However, participants only considered new employment opportunities within the hospitality field, indicating that the impact of COVID-19 had not affected their attraction to a career in this field (Bajrami et al., 2021). The organizational changes discussed did not specifically identify the impact of the COVID-19 shutdown on furloughed employees.

Observations also considered job insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic and the influence of organizational identification (the degree to which an employee shares the goals, values, mission, and connection to the organization). In 2021, Chen and Chen used path analysis to identify any causal relationships between job insecurity, organizational identification, and intention to stay. Results indicated that strong organizational identification significantly strengthened the choice to stay (Chen & Chen, 2021). The impact on furloughed employees and mitigation of employee concerns about being furloughed were not identified as considerations.

Studies that focused on employees leaving the hospitality field and returning during the COVID-19 pandemic were not identified. However, the topic of boomerang employees has been researched just not specifically in the hospitality field (Snyder et al., 2020). Boomerang employees have left voluntarily or involuntarily for opportunities in other organizations. This category excludes seasonal, furloughed, or temporary workers. Return to the employer involves the chance to renegotiate their terms of engagement and reset any psychological contract violations (individual beliefs regarding a reciprocal exchange agreement between the employee and employer) to restore satisfaction with the job and organization (Snyder et al., 2020). The

term excludes furloughed employees, but the effect of the COVID-19 shutdown could make it more challenging for employers to attract these employees if they do not sense they can reset their psychological contract.

The current literature has explored employee satisfaction as a factor in turnover intentions. However, the focus has been through the lens of those leaving employment voluntarily. A study by Boswell et al. (2005) conducted over five years (1992 – 1996) indicated that a honeymoon-hangover impact could occur once an employee leaves for a new position. The honeymoon occurs initially as there is high satisfaction and diminishes when familiarity sets in and perhaps the new job or organizational culture is not a good fit, thus the hangover effect (Boswell et al., 2005). Studies related to this honeymoon-hangover impact have not considered the effect on employees making voluntary or involuntary career changes due to the COVID-19 shutdown.

Aside from the dominant factors traditionally considered when analyzing turnover intention, the literature provides relevant connections between the motivation to stay and predicting behavior. General behavior theory considers motive, the probability of success (skill), and incentives as variables that can help predict behavior. In analyzing the narrative of the furloughed employees and their decision to return after a career in a different field, identifying motivators for the change could provide new insight. The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT—*n* Achievement) and a purely cognitive approach (*v* Achievement) are often used to measure how achievement or success affects motive (McClelland, 1985). In his Human Motivation Theory, McClelland identifies three motivating factors: achievement, affiliation, and power (Gordon, 2021). Using a qualitative approach to analyze motive would require a review of the narratives

to determine if the subject obtained pleasure from past interactions. The experiences would be part of their cognitive makeup. The motive would be higher to participate, and behavior can be predicted (McClelland, 1985). Still, the literature does not consider if the effect of being furloughed will impact the ability to use motivating factors as a predictor of employee behavior.

A review of the existing literature indicates that many implications could be observed through the stories of the lived experiences presented by the study participants. However, there is no consideration of the impact variables such as sentiment, job satisfaction, absenteeism, and work commitment have in a situation where turnover intent was not predicated on performance or personal choice. Furthermore, surveys and quantitative research methods in the existing literature may not articulate the connection between work-related attitudes and behaviors on turnover intention.

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