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Too much of a good thing? The curvilinear effects of job clarity on career satisfaction and creativity among hospitality employees

Dan Zhu [a,1], Seontaik Kim [b,2], Qian Meng [a], Anh Minh (Jessica) Bui [a], Peter B. Kim [a,*,3]

[a] School of Hospitality and Tourism, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand
[b] Department of Business Administration, Earl G. Graves School of Business and Management, Morgan State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study challenges the assumption that greater job clarity always benefits service employees. Drawing on self-determination theory and the Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing framework, we test a moderated curvilinear mediation model linking job clarity, career satisfaction, and creativity, with career calling as a boundary condition. Using three-wave, multi-source data from 164 supervisor–employee dyads in Chinese hotels, results reveal inverted U-shaped relationships between job clarity and both career satisfaction and supervisor-rated creativity. Career satisfaction mediates this curvilinear effect. Moreover, career calling amplifies the curvature—employees high in calling gain greater motivational and creative benefits as clarity increases but experience sharper losses at very high clarity levels. These findings position job clarity as a dynamic and context-dependent resource, offering theoretical and managerial insights for fostering creativity and well-being among hospitality employees.

1. Introduction

Clarity represents a fundamental human need for coherence, predictability, and direction. In psychology, identity clarity, defined as the degree to which individuals' self-concepts are clearly articulated and confidently held, constitutes a central element of psychological well-being (Usborne and Taylor, 2010). In work settings, this same need for coherence is reflected in job clarity, or the extent to which employees understand their duties, responsibilities, and performance expectations (Bowen, 1986; Teas et al., 1979). In the hospitality industry, job clarity is often operationalized through Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which are managerial mechanisms designed to provide clear expectations for task performance, minimize inconsistencies, and enhance operational efficiency (Ghosh, 2022). SOPs are widely regarded as a cornerstone of effective hotel management because they promote service consistency, employee accountability, and quality control (Sinulingga et al., 2024). For example, hotel employees are often provided with clear responsibilities and expectations regarding guest complaints, room inspections, and check-in procedures. Such guidance is important in customer-facing environments, where service failures can quickly lead to customer dissatisfaction and reputational damage. By clarifying organizational expectations, SOPs help employees better understand their roles and responsibilities, thereby enhancing job clarity.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model suggests that job resources help employees achieve work goals, cope with job demands, and facilitate learning, growth, and development (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). From this perspective, job clarity can be viewed as a valuable job resource because it reduces uncertainty and provides employees with a clearer framework for action. Consistent with this view, research has linked job clarity to a range of desirable outcomes, including higher organizational commitment (ul-Hassan et al., 2021), job satisfaction (Abraham et al., 2022; Hassan, 2013), resilience (Bernuzzi et al., 2023), and proactive behavior (Lan et al., 2025). These benefits are crucial in hospitality settings, where frontline employees routinely face ambiguous guest requests, service variability, and emotionally demanding interactions. In such environments, clarity can help employees navigate uncertainty, manage service encounters effectively, and devote cognitive and emotional resources to delivering innovative service solutions (Bernuzzi et al., 2023; Grobelna, 2015; Kankam, 2022; Lan et al., 2025).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: dan.zhu@aut.ac.nz (D. Zhu), seontaik.kim@morgan.edu (S. Kim), qian.meng@aut.ac.nz (Q. Meng), hfg3312@autuni.ac.nz (A.M.(J. Bui), pkim@aut.ac.nz (P.B. Kim).
[1] OICD: 0000-0002-2827-464X
[2] OICD: 0000-0001-6400-9096
[3] OICD: 0000-0003-1063-5264

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Accordingly, job clarity, supported by managerial mechanisms such as SOPs, has traditionally been viewed as an important facilitator of effective job performance and service delivery.

Despite these benefits, the assumption that more job clarity is always better may be overly simplistic. From a JD-R perspective, at lower levels, additional clarity helps employees to interpret expectations and act with greater confidence. Therefore, increasing levels of job clarity should initially enhance employee functioning and creativity. However, its benefits may not increase indefinitely. Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci et al., 2017) suggests that employees perform more effectively when they understand the value of their work and experience autonomy in carrying out their tasks. Initially, greater job clarity provides direction and structure, but its incremental benefits may diminish at very high levels. Although high clarity does not necessarily restrict discretion, extensive efforts to clarify employees' roles may, under some conditions, be experienced as controlling or autonomy-constraining. For example, highly standardized service scripts can promote consistency but may limit employees' ability to personalize interactions or respond flexibly to unique guest requests (Victorino et al., 2013). As a result, the organizational means used to create clarity may sometimes restrict employees' discretion. Under these conditions, employees may experience less of the curiosity and flexibility needed for creative service behavior (Zhou, 2003).

This reasoning challenges the long-standing assumption of a uniformly positive, linear association between job clarity and creativity (e.g., Birgisdóttir et al., 2024; Frare and Beuren, 2021). The Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing (TMGT) framework provides a lens for understanding this pattern by suggesting that workplace attributes that are generally beneficial may become less effective or even detrimental at excessively high levels (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013; Yu et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023b). Consistent with this perspective, curvilinear effects have been observed for a range of organizational attributes, including transformational leadership, challenge stressors, and work predictability (Caniëls et al., 2022; Haldorai et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2020). These studies support the broader plausibility of nonlinear effects but do not directly examine job clarity. More directly, Zheng et al. (2016) found that the positive relationship between role clarity and supervisor satisfaction weakened as clarity increased, but whether this pattern extends to employee creativity remains unclear. Integrating JD-R, SDT, and TMGT, we propose that job clarity has an inverted U-shaped relationship with creativity: its benefits diminish as clarity increases, and may eventually reverse when the practices used to create clarity also limit self-initiated exploration.

Zheng et al. (2016) focused on satisfaction with the supervisor, leaving open whether the nonlinear effects of job clarity extend to creativity through employees' broader evaluations of their career progress. Career satisfaction refers to individuals' subjective evaluation of their overall career success and progress toward self-defined career goals (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Ng et al., 2005). Although broader than satisfaction with one's current job, career satisfaction may be informed by the accumulated workplace experiences of employees. In service settings, these career evaluations may be relevant to employees' willingness to engage in creative expression (Ouyang et al., 2021). Drawing on SDT and the JD-R framework, job clarity can function as a job resource that supports employees' competence and goal attainment, thereby contributing to more favorable evaluations of their career progress (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Deci et al., 2017). However, as the benefits of clarity diminish at relatively high levels, employees may perceive fewer opportunities to exercise judgment and develop their capabilities, which may weaken their evaluations of career progress. Consistent with TMGT logic, job clarity may therefore have a curvilinear relationship with subsequent career satisfaction. In turn, because employees who evaluate their career progress more favorably may be more willing to invest effort in creative problem-solving and service improvement (Lesener et al., 2020), corresponding increases and declines in career satisfaction may carry the curvilinear pattern forward to creativity.

To extend this framework, the study examines whether career calling shapes the curvilinear indirect link between job clarity and creativity via career satisfaction. Career calling reflects a deep sense of purpose and meaningful connection to one's work, which integrates personal identity and prosocial contribution (Berg et al., 2010; Duffy et al., 2011). Drawing on SDT (Deci et al., 2017), employees with a strong calling are guided by deeply internalized values and may therefore attach greater significance to whether role conditions support their valued work and career goals (Chang et al., 2021). Accordingly, they may welcome clear rules when these help them serve guests effectively, but respond more negatively when additional clarity offers little further guidance, or is experienced as limiting flexible goal pursuit. For employees with weaker callings, variations in clarity may have less influence on how they evaluate their broader career progress. Consequently, the curvilinear pattern linking clarity, career satisfaction, and creativity becomes steeper for those with strong callings but flatter for those with weaker callings. Although prior work has examined situational conditions surrounding role clarity (Zheng et al., 2016), whether a person-level orientation such as career calling shapes its nonlinear consequences remains unclear. Despite growing interest in calling as a motivational resource (Duffy et al., 2011), its moderating role in the job design–creativity nexus has received limited empirical attention. By investigating how calling amplifies or attenuates the nonlinear pathway from clarity to creativity, this study highlights when and for whom clarity fosters sustained creative performance in hospitality work.

This study offers a more balanced understanding of job clarity by revealing its dual potential to both enable and inhibit creativity. Theoretically, we advance job design and motivation research by moving beyond the long-standing assumption that clarity is uniformly beneficial, demonstrating instead that its effects follow a curvilinear trajectory consistent with TMGT logic. We further unpack the underlying career-evaluative pathway, showing that career satisfaction helps explain how varying degrees of clarity shape creative performance. In doing so, the study connects job design research with employees' broader evaluations of their career progress. Finally, by identifying career calling as an individual difference that alters the strength of this nonlinear pattern, thereby intensifying both the gains associated with increasing clarity and the declining returns observed at very high levels, we clarify when and for whom clarity fosters or constrains creativity. Collectively, these insights advance organizational behavior and hospitality research by framing job clarity as a dynamic, boundary-dependent resource rather than an unqualified good. The findings also contribute to the broader debate surrounding structure and discretion in hospitality by demonstrating that the benefits of perceived job clarity may not increase indefinitely.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

To explain why job clarity may have a nonlinear relationship with career satisfaction and creativity, we draw on three complementary perspectives: SDT theory, JD-R framework, and the TMGT effect. Each captures a different aspect of the relationship, and together they provide a more integrative account than any single framework alone. SDT holds that employees thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported, and that work contexts that satisfy these needs energize intrinsic motivation and high-quality engagement, whereas contexts that thwart them generate controlled motivation and disengagement (Deci et al., 2017; Deci and Ryan, 2000). A central distinction within SDT separates informational structure, which clarifies expectations and supports competence without restricting choice, from controlling structure, which pressures employees toward prescribed outcomes and frustrates autonomy (Lee et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2025). This distinction suggests that the effects of job clarity may not be

uniformly positive across all levels of clarity.

The JD-R framework (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) complements SDT by classifying work characteristics into demands, which require effort and deplete energy, and resources, which buffer demands and facilitate goal attainment. Within this framework, job clarity is often treated as a resource as it reduces ambiguity, accelerates task mastery, and frees cognitive capacity that can be redirected toward higher-order processes such as creative problem-solving (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2011; Kauppila, 2014). In hospitality settings, contextual resources of this kind have been linked to stronger newcomer adjustment, engagement, and innovative behavior (Bauer et al., 2025; Lim and Lu, 2024). JD-R thus explains the motivational gains that arise when an increase in clarity converts ambiguity into structure and supplies energy for engagement and exploration.

The TMGT framework addresses a key gap in SDT and JD-R regarding the conditions under which the effects of beneficial work attributes may not remain uniformly positive across all levels of those attributes (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013). TMGT proposes that attributes generally viewed as beneficial can generate diminishing, neutral, or even adverse outcomes when present at very low or very high levels, resulting in nonlinear relationships rather than simple linear effects. Curvilinear patterns of this kind have now been documented across a range of work attributes, including challenge stressors (Haldorai et al., 2022), leader benevolence (Zhang et al., 2023a), intrinsic motivation (Hai and Park, 2021), transformational leadership (Ma et al., 2020), work predictability (Caniëls et al., 2022), and guanxi (i.e., personal relationship networks based on reciprocal obligation and trust) in hospitality careers (Ren and Chadee, 2020). However, these studies demonstrate the broader applicability of TMGT across distinct work attributes rather than providing direct evidence about job clarity. More directly, Zheng et al. (2016) documented diminishing returns in the relationship between role clarity and supervisor satisfaction.

Integrated, the three perspectives explain why job clarity may generate diminishing returns and, under some conditions, be experienced as constraining. JD-R establishes the initial resource value of clarity by showing how reduced ambiguity can support goal attainment and conserve cognitive capacity (Kauppila, 2014). SDT explains why this benefit depends on how structure is experienced: clarity is motivating when it supports competence, but extensive efforts to create clarity may become detrimental when they are experienced as controlling and autonomy-frustrating (Deci et al., 2017). TMGT specifies the expected functional form, suggesting that the effects of job clarity may vary across different levels of clarity rather than following a simple linear pattern (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013). This integrated lens is well suited to hospitality work, where employees operate within structured service systems while still needing discretion to respond creatively to heterogeneous guest needs, service failures, and emotionally complex encounters (Lim and Lu, 2024; Yasin et al., 2026).

2.2. Job clarity and career satisfaction

Job clarity refers to the extent to which employees understand their work objectives, role expectations, responsibilities, and performance requirements (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2011). Lyons (1971) distinguished between objective clarity, which reflects the availability of role-related information, and subjective clarity, which reflects employees' perceived understanding of such information. Although organizations may establish SOPs, job descriptions, and performance systems to provide role-related information, employees often differ in how clearly they understand and internalize such information. Accordingly, the present study focuses on perceived job clarity. This focus is consistent with research suggesting that employees respond to workplace conditions based on how they perceive and interpret them rather than on the objective availability of such conditions (James and James, 1989), as well as broader organizational research showing that employee attitudes and reactions are shaped by their perceptions of organizational conditions (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2011). It is also aligned with the SDT and JD-R perspectives adopted in this study, both of which emphasize employees' subjective experience of workplace conditions.

In hospitality and other guest-facing settings, clarity functions as a core job resource that reduces uncertainty and guides performance in high-pressure encounters. Evidence shows that strengthening clarity improves newcomer attitudes and retention. In a three-month, hotel-based randomized program, newcomers in a structured knowledge-sharing socialization condition reported higher job clarity, job satisfaction, and commitment, and lower turnover intention, compared with controls (Lan et al., 2022). A recent review and meta-analysis of newcomer socialization likewise identified job clarity as a robust indicator of adjustment, with consistent links to job attitudes and well-being (Bauer et al., 2025).

Yet, from a TMGT perspective, more is not always "better". A multi-wave study of Thai hotel employees found an inverted U-shaped association between challenge stressors and both job satisfaction and service-oriented OCB, with satisfaction acting as a nonlinear mediator (Haldorai et al., 2022). Although this study examined challenge stressors rather than job clarity, it provides an analogous hospitality example of a nonlinear work attitude relationship. More directly, Zheng et al. (2016) demonstrated that role clarity can yield diminishing returns—and, under low developmental feedback or interpersonal justice, even adverse returns—for satisfaction with one's supervisor. However, supervisor satisfaction is directed toward a particular workplace relationship, leaving unresolved whether job clarity similarly shapes employees' broader evaluations of career progress.

Conceptually, low levels of perceived job clarity reflect uncertainty regarding work goals, role expectations, and performance requirements. As clarity rises, this uncertainty gives way to structure. Because employees' current roles provide an important context in which they pursue career goals, develop competencies, and accumulate achievements, employees gain a firmer sense of competence, face less strain from unpredictable evaluation, and can judge their progress toward career goals more readily (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Because a role can convey only a finite amount of information about expectations and evaluation, the value of each further increment of clarity may diminish as certainty approaches its ceiling. SDT holds that employees thrive when their needs for competence and autonomy are supported (Deci et al., 2017). At low clarity, competence is thwarted and ambiguity elevates stress and risk of error. As clarity rises, clear standards enable mastery and may contribute to more favorable evaluations of career progress (Kang et al., 2020; Lan et al., 2022). Whether the relationship then flattens, or turns downward, is an empirical question. Consistent with Zheng et al. (2016), very high role clarity may generate declining returns when employees interpret extensive role specification as restrictive or as limiting their discretion. Three anchors therefore motivate a curvilinear hypothesis: socialization interventions that supply role information improve newcomers' satisfaction and retention (Bauer et al., 2025; Lan et al., 2022); adjacent hospitality studies reveal inverted-U patterns for job conditions and attitudes (Haldorai et al., 2022); and role clarity shows conditional curvilinear relations with supervisor satisfaction (Zheng et al., 2016). By integrating SDT's competence mechanism with TMGT's inflection logic, we expect the relationship between job clarity and career satisfaction to take an inverted U-shaped form. Based on this theorizing and empirical evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Job clarity exhibits an inverted U-shaped relationship with career satisfaction.

2.3. Job clarity and creativity

Employee creativity, the generation of ideas that are both novel and useful to the job or organization, is central to service differentiation and problem-solving in hospitality settings (Lim and Lu, 2024; Ouyang et al.,

2021; Zhu et al., 2023). Frontline roles require adaptive, idea-rich responses to diverse guest needs. Research shows that contextual resources, such as empowerment and an innovation climate, and motivational states such as engagement and meaningfulness, systematically predict creative and innovative performance in hospitality (Lim and Lu, 2024; Ouyang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). From a JD-R perspective, these resources enhance motivational energy, which can be directed toward creative problem-solving (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Within this stream, job clarity can function as a creativity-enabling resource because it reduces error-avoidant vigilance and frees cognitive capacity for exploration during guest encounters (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Lim and Lu, 2024). Meta-analyses in hospitality confirm that enabling climates, support, and empowerment are positively associated with employees' creative outputs, positioning job clarity within a broader set of structure-and-support resources that foster creativity (Ouyang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023).

Research on creativity also cautions that excessive formalization, close monitoring, and routinization can narrow attentional scope and steer behavior toward rule compliance rather than idea generation (Madjar et al., 2011; Zhou, 2003). In hospitality, curvilinear patterns have been observed for creativity-relevant drivers, such as leadership and time pressure, rather than job clarity itself, indicating benefits that intensify up to an inflection point and then taper or reverse (Ma et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023b). Meta-analytic evidence further shows that climates and attitudes that energize creativity are powerful, but their effects vary with context and can be attenuated when structures become overly constraining (Ouyang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). Whether job clarity itself follows an inverted-U pattern for creativity remains under-tested, since most studies pool clarity with other resources or examine linear associations (Zhu et al., 2023).

Integrating SDT, JD-R, and TMGT clarifies why job clarity may exhibit an inverted U-shaped relationship with creativity. JD-R identifies clarity as a job resource: it reduces ambiguity, releases cognitive capacity from error-avoidant vigilance, and supplies the motivational energy that fuels creative problem-solving in guest-facing tasks (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Within SDT, clarity functions as an informational structure when it provides sufficient direction—articulating goals, procedures, and criteria that help employees master service tasks—while leaving sufficient discretion to channel competence toward novel and useful ideas (Lim and Lu, 2024). Although clarity itself is different from scripting and supervision, organizational efforts to maximize clarity through tightly scripted or closely supervised practices, may be experienced as controlling or indicative of mistrust, rather than as informational (Zheng et al., 2016), potentially frustrating autonomy and directing attention toward rule compliance rather than idea generation (Madjar et al., 2011; Zhou, 2003). TMGT then describes the resulting trajectory: the benefit of clarity is largest while its resource value dominates, but may weaken as its additional informational value diminishes, and potentially turn negative when extensive role specification is experienced as constraining (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013). Thus, JD-R explains why clarity initially supports creativity, SDT explains why excessive clarity can undermine the autonomy needed for creative discretion, and TMGT specifies why the overall relationship should take an inverted-U form. In light of this rationale and the supporting empirical evidence, we propose:

Hypothesis 2. Job clarity exhibits an inverted U-shaped relationship with creativity.

2.4. The mediating role of career satisfaction

Career satisfaction denotes employees' subjective evaluation of their overall career success and progress toward self-defined career goals (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Ng et al., 2005; Haenggli et al., 2021). Although career satisfaction is broader and more cumulative than satisfaction with one's current job, employees' ongoing work experiences may inform their evaluations of career progress. Building on SDT and JD-R, we position career satisfaction as a career-evaluative outcome that may be shaped by work contexts that support competence and autonomy, and provide sufficient resources for goal pursuit, thereby serving as a pathway through which work design may translate into discretionary, idea-oriented behavior (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Deci et al., 2017).

In service settings, clarity in duties, procedures, and standards generally elevates positive job attitudes by reducing uncertainty and supporting competence (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Yet the clarity–attitude link is not strictly monotonic. Organizational psychology evidence shows a curvilinear association between job clarity and satisfaction with one's supervisor: reactions initially improve as clarity rises but subsequently attenuate or reverse (Zheng et al., 2016). Other work characteristics, including work predictability and challenge stressors, also exhibit inverted-U relationships with creativity and attitudes, indicating that their benefits may weaken rather than indefinitely continue to increase (Caniëls et al., 2022; Haldorai et al., 2022). Together, these findings suggest that the benefits of work characteristics may diminish at higher levels, with Zheng et al. (2016) providing the most direct precedent for job clarity. A second regularity is that positive attitudinal and motivational states reliably nourish creative and innovative performance. Meta-analytic reviews conclude that contextual resources and positive states such as engagement, meaningfulness, and satisfaction-adjacent attitudes, are robust antecedents of employees' creative and innovative behavior (Lim and Lu, 2024; Ouyang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). Although these findings primarily concern proximal job attitudes and motivational states rather than career satisfaction, they suggest that favorable work-related evaluations can encourage discretionary and idea-oriented behavior. From SDT and JD-R perspectives, higher career satisfaction may signal need fulfillment and resource gains, reflected in employees' favorable evaluations of their competence development and progress toward career goals, thereby energizing the exploration of novel and useful ideas in guest-facing tasks.

Integrating these strands, career satisfaction is expected to transmit the nonlinearity from job clarity to creativity. As clarity increases from lower levels, employees may evaluate their career progress more favorably as reduced uncertainty and enhanced competence promote need fulfillment and resource gains, with these favorable evaluations subsequently benefiting creativity. With further increases, its additional resource value may diminish; moreover, when extensive role clarification is implemented through practices experienced as restrictive, it may frustrate autonomy, weaken evaluations of career progress, and dampen creativity. Curvilinear mediation arises when the antecedent–mediator path is nonlinear while the mediator–outcome path remains positive (Hayes and Preacher, 2010; Preacher et al., 2010). This logic, together with hospitality evidence modeling inverted-U antecedent–satisfaction paths with downstream discretionary behavior, supports the expectation that clarity's indirect effect on creativity through career satisfaction will be curvilinear (Haldorai et al., 2022; Lim and Lu, 2024). Taken together, the theoretical framework and supporting evidence imply the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Career satisfaction mediates the inverted U-shaped relationship between job clarity and creativity.

2.5. The moderating role of career calling

Career calling provides a motivational context that shapes how employees perceive and respond to job clarity (Muehlhausen et al., 2023). Calling reflects work viewed as purposeful and meaningful, often central to identity and pursued with a sense of prosocial impact (Dik and Duffy, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Across industries, calling is associated with higher job satisfaction, engagement, proactive career behavior, and adaptive performance (Thompson and Bunderson, 2019; Vianello et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2016). In hospitality, meaning-centered orientations

and calling-related motives correspond with stronger employee satisfaction, knowledge sharing, and service quality (Davras and Davras, 2024; Karatepe and Kim, 2023). Related research has also connected calling with role clarity: Muehlhausen et al. (2023) found that role clarity strengthened the relationship between experiencing a calling and organizational embeddedness. Zheng et al. (2016) examined the situational moderators of the effects of role clarity, but did not consider whether a person-level orientation such as career calling shaped their curvature.

Drawing on SDT (Deci and Ryan, 2000), we argue that because a calling is closely tied to identity and life purpose, it increases the personal significance of whether role conditions support employees' valued work and career goals (Duffy et al., 2011; Hall and Chandler, 2005). When clarity reduces uncertainty while preserving discretion, it operates as an informational structure that supports competence and affirms progress toward personally valued career goals, thereby strengthening career satisfaction. Accordingly, employees with a strong calling may welcome detailed rules when they facilitate effective service and the pursuit of valued goals, rather than inherently resisting such structure. At very high levels, however, the additional informational value of clarity may diminish, leaving employees with less perceived scope for the self-directed pursuit of meaningful career goals, and weakening their evaluations of career progress. Because these goals are personally significant, both the supportive and constraining implications of clarity may carry greater weight in their career evaluations.

Some precedent exists for an interaction between calling and role conditions. Sense of calling strengthened the positive relationship between supportive human resource practices and employee satisfaction in hospitality settings (Davras and Davras, 2024), and experiencing a calling predicted organizational embeddedness under high role clarity (Muehlhausen et al., 2023). Vianello et al. (2022) likewise found that calling and job demands interacted in predicting self-rated task performance, with the positive association between calling and performance weakening under high job demands. Calling has also been linked to job crafting, indicating that employees with a strong calling actively respond to role conditions by aligning their work with personally meaningful goals (Chang et al., 2021). Although these studies differ in their model direction and outcomes, they converge in showing that the consequences of calling depend on whether role conditions facilitate or hinder the pursuit of valued goals.

Taken together, the preceding discussion suggests that calling may heighten employees' sensitivity to the goal relevance of job clarity. Employees with a strong calling should therefore derive greater career-satisfaction gains as clarity supports valued goal pursuit, but experience sharper declines once additional clarity provides little further guidance or begins to strain flexible goal pursuit. We therefore expect the inverted U-shaped relationship between job clarity and career satisfaction to be more pronounced when career calling is high. Based on this theorizing and empirical evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4. Career calling moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between job clarity and career satisfaction, such that this curvilinear relationship is stronger when career calling is high.

As previously discussed, career satisfaction mediates the curvilinear clarity–creativity link (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Lim and Lu, 2024; Ouyang et al., 2021). If calling increases the weight of role conditions in career appraisals, the clarity–career satisfaction path, and with it the indirect path to creativity, should be more strongly curved when calling is high (Hall and Chandler, 2005). Methodologically, this pattern is a first-stage moderated curvilinear mediation, in which the size of the indirect effect varies with the moderator because the antecedent–mediator path is both nonlinear and conditional (Edwards and Lambert, 2007; Hayes and Preacher, 2010). If calling steepens the clarity–career satisfaction curve, the satisfaction-based curvilinear indirect effect on creativity will be larger in magnitude when calling is high. Integrating this theorizing and evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5. The curvilinear indirect effect of job clarity on creativity via career satisfaction is moderated by career calling, such that it is stronger for employees with high career calling.

Fig. 1 illustrates the proposed research model.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through recruitment activities conducted across 32 hotels located in Kaifeng, Henan Province, China. In line with prior research (Park et al., 2024), our study included participants from multiple organizations rather than a single site, thereby capturing a more diverse sample and enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The final sample consisted of 164 dyads of service employees and their direct supervisors (N = 145). Supervisor-level cluster sizes were generally small, with a mean of 1.13 employees per supervisor (SD = 0.66). Among the employees, 67% were female, with an average age of 41 years (SD = 10.22) and an average job tenure of seven years (SD = 4.23). Regarding education, 19% had no formal qualifications, 38% held a high school qualification, 37% held a diploma, and 6% held a bachelor's degree.

In terms of departmental affiliation, 71% of employees worked in accommodation operations and 23% in food and beverage operations. Regarding job position, 74% of respondents occupied frontline or entry-level positions, whereas 26% held supervisory or managerial positions. The participating organizations varied in size, with 73% of respondents working in hotels employing 100 or more full-time employees, 11% working in hotels employing 50–99 employees, and 16% working in hotels employing 10–49 employees.

3.2. Procedure

Before data collection commenced, the purpose and procedures of the study were introduced to hotel management (e.g., duty managers and HR directors), and approval to recruit employees was obtained. Employees were then invited to participate in the study and were provided with information regarding the study objectives, survey schedule, confidentiality procedures, and participation incentives. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that their survey responses would be used solely for research purposes and would not be disclosed to their managers or employing organizations. Employees who agreed to participate provided their contact details directly to the research team and were asked to invite their immediate supervisors to participate. Interested supervisors then contacted the research team directly and provided their contact details. Subsequent surveys were distributed directly to individual employees and supervisors, rather than through the hotels; therefore, hotel identifiers were not collected or retained in the analytical dataset.

To reduce common method bias, we employed a three-wave time-lagged design, with each wave separated by six months. The use of six-month intervals is consistent with prior vocational research on career satisfaction and employee creativity (Hirschi et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020). In the present study, this interval was selected to provide temporal separation between measurement occasions rather than to demonstrate within-person change. At Time 1 (T1), 320 employees completed a survey that included measures of job clarity, career calling, and demographic information. Six months later, 236 employees completed the Time 2 (T2) survey measuring career satisfaction, representing a retention rate of 73.8%. At Time 3 (T3), twelve months after T1, supervisors were invited to evaluate their subordinates' creativity. This resulted in 164 matched employee–supervisor dyads, representing a retention rate of 51.3% from the original T1 sample. Participants received RMB 10 (approximately USD 1.50) for each completed survey

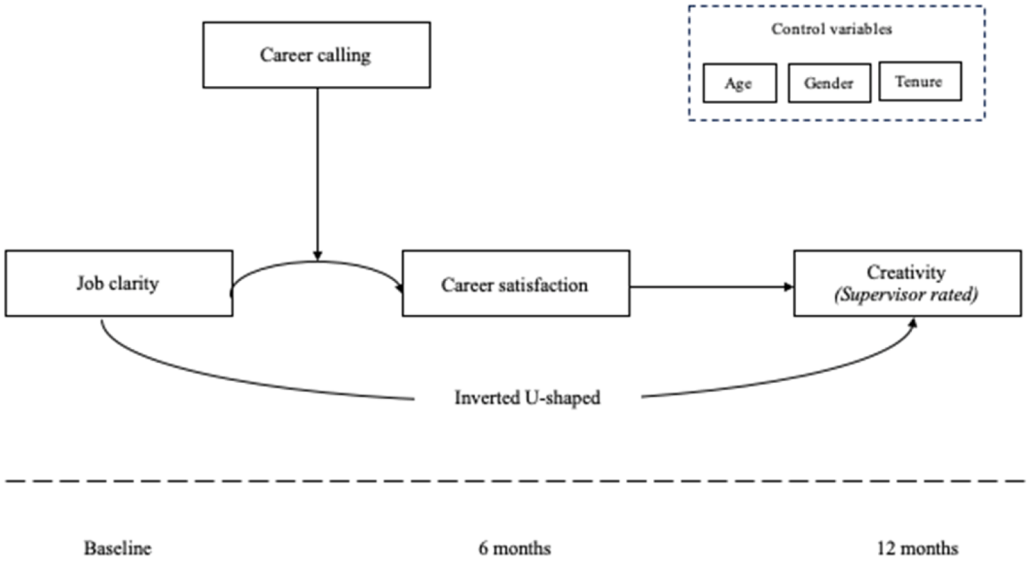


Fig. 1. Research Model.

wave. To match responses across time points and sources, participants provided the last four digits of their phone numbers and those of their supervisors or subordinates. These identifiers were used solely for matching purposes and were removed prior to data analysis.

3.3. Measures

All scales were originally developed in English and translated into Chinese using the back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). All the items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The full questionnaire items are provided in Appendix A.

Job clarity was measured using items adapted from the scale originally developed by Rizzo et al. (1970). Although the original scale was designed to assess role ambiguity, the items were positively worded and have also been widely used to operationalize job clarity in prior research (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2011). The present study used a shortened three-item version of the scale, which has been employed to assess role ambiguity/clarity with good reliability (e.g., $\alpha = 0.80$, Rod et al., 2008; $\alpha = 0.85$, Mihalca et al., 2021). Sample items include "*I have clear, planned goals and objectives for my job"* and *"I know how my performance is going to be evaluated.*" Consistent with Lyons' (1971) distinction between objective and subjective clarity, the scale captures employees' perceived role expectation clarity, reflecting the extent to which they feel certain about their work objectives, responsibilities, and performance evaluation criteria. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.78.

Career calling was assessed using the 12-item scale from Dik et al. (2008). A sample item is, "*I am pursuing my current line of work because I believe I have been called to do so*." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.82 in the present study, consistent with reliability estimates reported in previous research (e.g., Ehrhardt and Ensher, 2021).

Career satisfaction was examined using the five-item scale by Greenhaus et al. (1990). A sample item is, "*I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards meeting my goals for advancement*." This scale has been frequently utilized in previous research to assess career satisfaction and has shown strong reliability (e.g., $\alpha = 0.93$, Chang et al., 2020). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.95.

Creativity was assessed using the six-item scale developed by Madjar et al. (2011), with supervisors rating each employee's creativity. A sample item is, "*This employee is a good source of highly creative ideas*." The original scale included two dimensions—radical and incremental creativity. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated that the two-factor model provided a better fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.87$, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98) compared to the one-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 2.13$, RMSEA = 0.08, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98). Nevertheless, since the one-factor model demonstrated acceptable fit and the two dimensions were strongly correlated in our sample ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.01$) and consistent with Mao et al. (2020), we combined them to represent overall creativity. The combined scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$).

Meta-analytic research has shown that employees' age, gender, and tenure were significantly associated with their career satisfaction (Ng et al., 2005). Similarly, prior studies have identified significant relationships between these demographic variables and creativity (Zhu et al., 2023). Accordingly, we controlled for age, gender, and tenure in our analyses predicting career satisfaction and creativity.

3.4. Data analysis

Hierarchical regression analyses were used for data analysis. Job clarity and career calling were mean-centered before computing the squared and interaction terms, following Aiken et al. (1991). To test the curvilinear mediation and moderated mediation hypotheses, we employed Mplus 8.3. Specifically, we estimated the instantaneous indirect effects following Hayes and Preacher (2010). In addition, to further assess the stability of the parameter estimates at the observed sample size, and following established procedures (Muthén and Muthén, 2002; Preacher et al., 2010), we conducted Monte Carlo simulations with 20,000 replications to generate 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects, conditional indirect effects, and the index of moderated mediation.

A sensitivity power analysis was also conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). Based on the proposed moderated curvilinear mediation model—which included six focal predictors (the quadratic term, interaction term, and quadratic interaction term) and three control variables—an alpha level of.05, a desired power of.95, and a sample size of 164, the analysis indicated that the study had sufficient power to detect medium-sized effects ($f^2 = .15$). However, smaller effects may not have been detected reliably.

4. Results

4.1. Common method variance

To address potential common method variance (CMV), several

procedures recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2012) were implemented. These included maintaining respondent anonymity and collecting data across multiple waves and sources (i.e., from both employees and their supervisors). Furthermore, Harman's single-factor test (Harman, 1976) revealed that the first factor accounted for only 40% of the total variance, which is below the threshold of 50%, suggesting that CMV was not a major concern.

4.2. Measurement model and descriptive statistics

Before proceeding with hypothesis testing, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using Mplus 8.3. As presented in Table 1, the proposed four-factor model demonstrated better fit to the data (χ^2/df = 1.65, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.95) than the three-, two- and one-factor models. Table 2 demonstrates that all constructs achieved composite reliability values above 0.80, supporting the internal consistency of the measures. Additionally, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was greater than its inter-construct correlations, providing further evidence of discriminant validity.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1. predicted that job clarity would have a curvilinear relationship with career satisfaction. Model 3 of Table 3 shows that the linear term of job clarity was positively related to career satisfaction (b = 0.51, SE = 0.12, $p < 0.001$), and the squared term was negatively related to career satisfaction (b = –0.47, SE = 0.12, $p < 0.001$). The inclusion of the squared term of job clarity explained significant additional variance (ΔR^2 = 6%). To further assess whether this relationship constituted an inverted U rather than merely exhibiting negative curvature, we examined the turning point and the slopes at both ends of the observed job clarity range (4.00–7.00), following Haans et al. (2015). The estimated turning point was 6.31 (95% CI [5.89, 6.74]), with both the estimate and its confidence interval falling within the observed range. Consistent with the directional inverted U-shaped hypothesis, the slope was significantly positive at the lower bound (b = 2.18, $p < 0.001$) and significantly negative at the upper bound (b = –0.64, $p < 0.05$). Fig. 2 presents a residual plot following Cohen et al. (2003), which renders the curvilinear pattern more transparent by displaying the relationship after accounting for the linear effect. Taken together, these findings support H1.

Hypothesis 2. predicted that job clarity would have a curvilinear relationship with creativity. As shown in Model 7 of Table 3, after entering job clarity and its quadratic term, the coefficient of the linear term of job clarity was only marginally significant (b = 0.20, SE = 0.11, $p < 0.10$), whereas the quadratic term was significantly and negatively related to creativity (b = –0.30, SE = 0.11, $p < 0.01$). Importantly, the inclusion of the squared term of job clarity explained significant additional variance (ΔR^2 = 4%). As per the process adopted for H1, to further assess whether this relationship constituted an inverted U rather than merely exhibiting negative curvature, we examined the turning point and the slopes at both ends of the observed job clarity range (4.00–7.00), following Haans et al. (2015). The estimated turning point was 6.10 (95% CI [5.61, 6.59]), with both the estimate and its confidence interval falling within the observed range. Consistent with the directional inverted U-shaped hypothesis, the slope was significantly positive at the lower bound (b = 1.25, $p < 0.001$) and significantly negative at the upper bound (b = –0.53, $p < 0.05$). Fig. 3 presents a residual plot following Cohen et al. (2003), which renders the curvilinear pattern more transparent by displaying the relationship after accounting for the linear effect. Taken together, these findings support H2.

Table 1
Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Model	No. of factors	χ^2/df	$\triangle\chi^2$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Baseline model	4 factors: JC, CS, Calling, Creativity	1.65	N/A	0.95	0.95	0.06
Alternative 1	3 factors: (JC + CS), Calling, Creativity	2.08	129	0.92	0.91	0.08
Alternative 2	2 factors: (JC + CS + Calling), Creativity	6.14	1341	0.62	0.59	0.18
Alternative 3	1 factor: (JC + CS + Calling + Creativity)	8.35	2020	0.45	0.41	0.21

Note. JC = Job clarity; CS = Career satisfaction; d.f. = Degrees of freedom; CFI = Comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index;
RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation.

Hypothesis 3. predicted that career satisfaction would mediate the curvilinear (inverted U-shaped) relationship between job clarity and creativity. As shown in Model 8 of Table 3, both job clarity (b = 0.02, SE = 0.11, $p > 0.05$) and the quadratic term of job clarity (b = –0.13, SE = 0.11, $p > 0.05$) were not significantly associated with creativity, whereas career satisfaction *was* significantly associated with creativity (b = 0.35, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.001$), providing *p*reliminary support for H3. To examine the curvilinear path of the indirect effect of job clarity on creativity via career satisfaction, we employed Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications (Preacher et al., 2010). The curvilinear indirect effect of job clarity on creativity via career satisfaction was significant (Estimate = –0.1663, SE = 0.0575, 95% CI = [–0.2790, –0.0536]).

In accordance with Hayes and Preacher's (2010) method, we calculated the instantaneous indirect effect at ±1 SD of job clarity. As shown in Table 4, based on 20,000 Monte Carlo replications, the indirect effect of job clarity on creativity via career satisfaction was significant at low levels of job clarity (Estimate = 0.3729, 95% CI = [0.1781, 0.5677]), and diminished at high levels (Estimate = –0.0110, 95% CI = [–0.1545, 0.1325]). The difference between these indirect effects was significant ($\triangle b$ = –0.3839, 95% CI = [–0.6440, –0.1238]). Taken together, the findings suggest that career satisfaction mediates the curvilinear relationship between job clarity and creativity, with the curvilinear form originating specifically from the nonlinear relationship between job clarity and career satisfaction. Therefore, H3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4. proposes that career calling moderates the curvilinear relationship between job clarity and career satisfaction. As shown in Model 4 of Table 3, the interaction between the squared term of job clarity and career calling was significant (b = –0.25, SE = 0.11, $p < 0.05$). Following Aiken et al.'s (1991) procedure, we conducted simple slope analysis. As shown in Fig. 4, when career calling was low (–1 SD), the curvature was not significant (b = –0.19, $p > 0.05$). When career calling was high (+1 SD), the negative curvature was statistically significant (b = –0.60, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the curvature became more pronounced under high career calling. Therefore, H4 was supported.

Hypothesis 5. predicted a moderated mediation effect, suggesting that the curvilinear indirect relationship between job clarity and creativity via career satisfaction would be stronger when career calling was high. To test this, we followed Hayes and Preacher's (2010) method and examined the instantaneous indirect effect of job clarity on creativity through career satisfaction at four combinations of ±1 SD of job clarity and career calling. The Monte Carlo simulation method with 20,000 replications was used, and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for each estimate.

As shown in Table 5, the instantaneous indirect effects differed across conditions. When career calling was low (–1 SD), the difference between the indirect effects at low and high levels of job clarity was not significant (Δb = –0.1524, 95% CI [–0.4046, 0.0998]). However, when career calling was high (+1 SD), this difference became significant (Δb = –0.4864, 95% CI [–0.7757, –0.1971]), indicating a more pronounced

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations.

	M	SD	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	41.33	10.22	-	-	1						
2. Gender[a]	-	-	-	-	–0.20*	1					
3. Tenure	7.40	4.23	-	-	0.32**	–0.1	1				
4. Job clarity at T1	5.77	0.58	0.80	0.55	0.04	–0.10	–0.05	1			
5. Calling at T1	5.28	0.83	0.84	0.63	0.15	–0.05	–0.05	0.50**	1		
6. Career satisfaction at T2	5.24	0.96	0.95	0.80	0.23**	–0.19*	0.03	0.42**	0.56**	1	
7. Creativity at T3	5.54	0.78	0.85	0.74	-0.06	–0.15	–0.04	0.23**	0.32**	0.45**	1

Note. $N = 164$.
[a] Dummy-coded: 0 = male, 1 = female.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Results of Regression Analysis.

	Career satisfaction				Creativity			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Control variables								
Age	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)
Gender[a]	-0.32* (0.16)	-0.24 (0.14)	-0.24 (0.14)	-0.22 (0.13)	-0.27* (0.13)	-0.24 (0.13)	-0.24 (0.13)	-0.15 (0.12)
Tenure	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Predictor								
Job clarity		0.67*** (0.12)	0.51*** (0.12)	0.32* (0.13)		0.29** (0.10)	0.20[a] (0.11)	0.02 (0.11)
(Job clarity)^2			-0.47*** (0.12)	-0.39* (0.16)			-0.30** (0.11)	-0.13 (0.11)
Interactions								
Career calling				0.59*** (0.10)				
Job clarity x career calling				-0.11 (0.14)				
(Job clarity)^2 x career calling				-0.25* (0.11)				
Mediator								
Career satisfaction								0.35*** (0.07)
R^2	0.08	0.24	0.30	0.44	0.03	0.08	0.12	0.25
ΔR^2	-	0.16***	0.06***	0.14***	-	0.05**	0.04**	0.13***

[+] $p < .10$.
Note. $N = 164$.
[a] Dummy-coded: 0 = male, 1 = female.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

curvilinear mediation effect.

To further assess the significance of the moderated mediation effect, we calculated the difference between the two Δb values, yielding a moderated mediation index of 0.3340 ($SE = 0.1248$, 95% CI [0.0894, 0.5786]). This result demonstrates that the curvilinear nature of the instantaneous indirect effect significantly varied as a function of career calling. Therefore, H5 was supported.

5. Discussion

This research challenges the long-standing assumption that greater job clarity always benefits employees. Drawing on TMGT (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013) and SDT (Deci et al., 2017), we examined a moderated curvilinear mediation model in which job clarity influences career satisfaction, which in turn affects creativity, with career calling serving as a boundary condition. Results show that job clarity follows an inverted U-shaped pattern for both career satisfaction and supervisor-rated creativity. Career satisfaction mediates the curvilinear link between job clarity and creativity. Moreover, career calling intensifies the curvature: employees with a strong sense of calling report more favorable evaluations of their career progress when clarity provides sufficient direction, but experience sharper declines in career satisfaction at very high levels of perceived clarity. Together, these findings underscore the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of job clarity and demonstrate that its benefits depend on both the degree of clarity and the motivational orientation of employees.

5.1. Theoretical and research implications

This study advances theory by reconceptualizing job clarity as a dynamic motivational resource rather than a uniformly positive job attribute. Prior research has portrayed clarity as linearly beneficial—reducing uncertainty, enhancing predictability, and facilitating performance (e.g., Hegazy et al., 2023; Karkkola et al., 2019). Yet this view neglects the motivational tension inherent in structured work environments. Building on JD-R (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) and SDT (Deci and Ryan, 2000), our findings show that job clarity functions as a resource when it reduces ambiguity and supports competence, but its benefits may diminish at very high levels. Our interpretation of this declining return is grounded in prior role-clarity research. Spreitzer et al. (1999) suggested that the threshold effect of very high role clarity may arise when extensive role specification reflects micromanagement and leaves less room for team discretion. Zheng et al. (2016) similarly documented diminishing returns of role clarity for supervisor satisfaction and theorized that conditional downturns may reflect perceived supervisor mistrust. Extending this evidence, our findings reveal inverted U-shaped relationships between job clarity and both career satisfaction and supervisor-rated creativity. They also identify a career-evaluative pathway through which job clarity relates to creativity and show that career calling conditions this curvilinear indirect pathway. In doing so, we extend TMGT logic (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013) to a core job design variable and respond to recent calls for a more contingent and nonlinear understanding of work characteristics (Lan

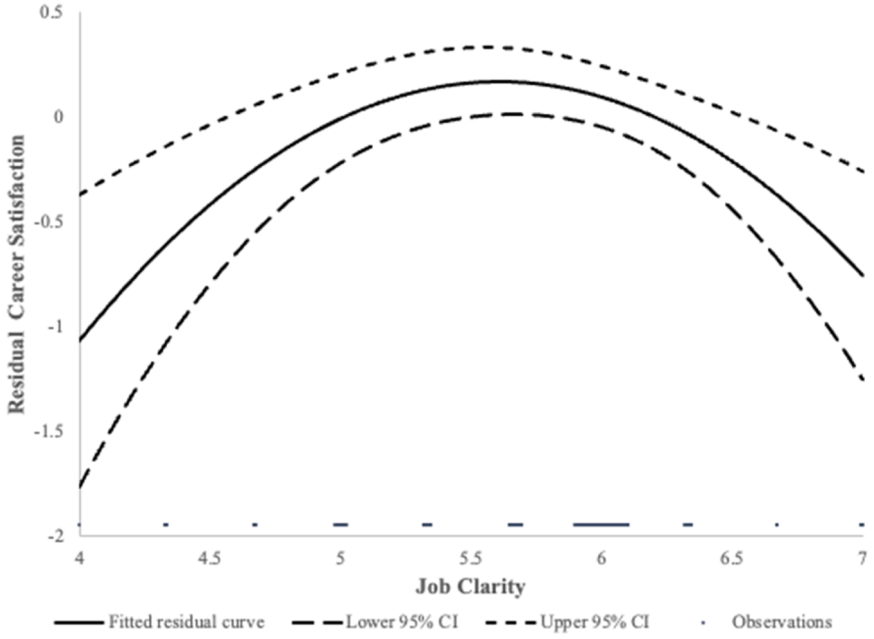


Fig. 2. The Curvilinear Relationship between Job Clarity and Career Satisfaction. *Note.* Fig. 2 presents a residual plot following Cohen et al. (2003), which highlights the nonlinear relationship after accounting for the linear effect. The solid line represents the fitted quadratic residual curve, the dashed lines indicate the 95% confidence band, and the rug marks show the distribution of observations.

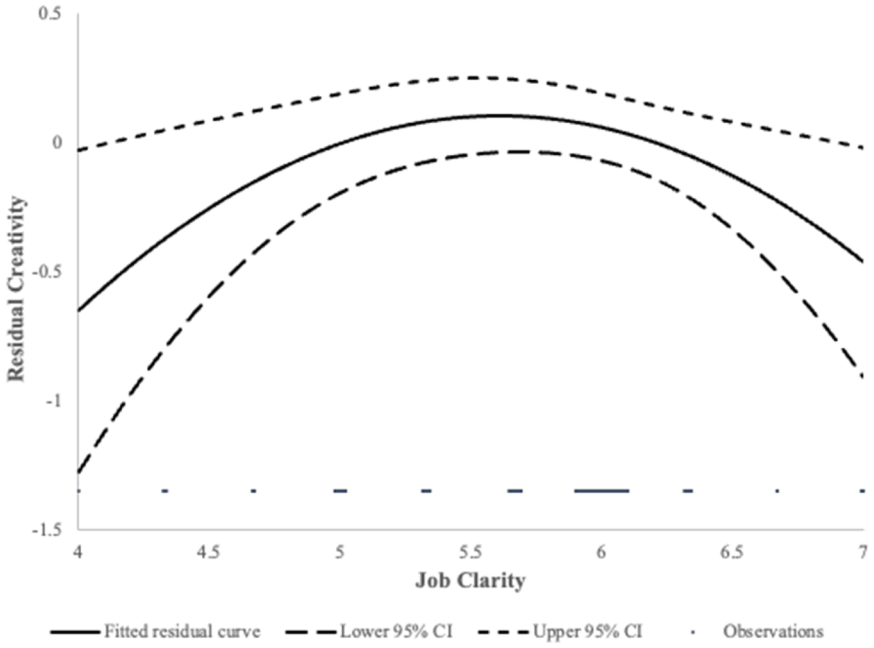


Fig. 3. The Curvilinear Relationship between Job Clarity and Creativity. *Note.* Fig. 3 presents a residual plot following Cohen et al. (2003), which highlights the nonlinear relationship after accounting for the linear effect. The solid line represents the fitted quadratic residual curve, the dashed lines indicate the 95% confidence band, and the rug marks show the distribution of observations.

et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2016). Beyond challenging the "more is better" assumption, these results reposition clarity as a double-edged construct—one that supports competence and direction but may generate diminishing returns at very high levels, particularly when extensive role specification carries restrictive meanings for employees. Future research could examine whether similar curvilinear dynamics characterize other structural or relational features of work, such as leadership styles (e.g., authoritarian, benevolent) or career resources (e.g., development opportunities), thereby enriching theories of motivation and job design with a more realistic, boundary-sensitive perspective.

This research extends understanding of the motivational processes through which job clarity influences employee creativity by identifying a curvilinear pathway operating through career satisfaction. Rather than assuming a stable, linear transmission from structure to outcomes, we demonstrate that the strength of this indirect pathway varies according to the level of job clarity. The indirect effect strengthens as clarity reduces ambiguity and provides direction, but weakens—and may eventually reverse—as additional clarity yields diminishing returns or extensive role specification is experienced as overly prescriptive. Prior

Table 4
Instantaneous Indirect Effects of Job Clarity on Creativity via Career Satisfaction.

Job clarity	Estimate	SE	95% CI[a]
Low	0.3729	0.0994	[0.1781, 0.5677]
High	–0.0110	0.0732	[–0.1545, 0.1325]
Differences	–0.3839	0.1327	[–0.6440, –0.1238]

Note. $N = 164$.
[a] CI = Confidence interval. 95% CI were calculated using the Monte Carlo method with 20,000 replications.

research has generally conceptualized employee satisfaction as a linear mechanism linking job characteristics to employee outcomes (e.g., Asamani et al., 2025; ul-Hassan et al., 2021). Extending this perspective, our findings suggest that the job clarity– career satisfaction pathway may itself be conditional and nonlinear. In doing so, the study highlights career satisfaction as the mechanism through which the nonlinear effects of job clarity are translated into employee creativity. Moreover, by examining career satisfaction rather than organization-focused attitudes such as commitment or turnover intention (Ćulibrk et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022), this study broadens current understanding of the attitudinal consequences of job clarity. Thus, experiences within employees' current roles may inform their broader evaluations of career progress, encouraging future studies to trace how structural conditions shape sustainable motivation and creativity across the career span.

This study positions career calling as a key boundary condition that shapes how employees interpret and respond to job clarity. While prior research has largely treated calling as a uniformly beneficial resource that fosters commitment and performance (Duffy et al., 2011; Hirschi, 2012), our findings reveal a more complex, contingent pattern. The curvature of the clarity–career satisfaction relationship was more pronounced among employees with a strong sense of calling and flatter among those lower in calling. This pattern suggests that role conditions carry greater weight in the career appraisals of strongly called employees. Importantly, this does not imply that these employees resist structure—in fact, they may value detailed rules when such rules facilitate effective guest service, and although calling may sometimes buffer employees against unfavorable work conditions, the steeper curve observed here is more consistent with an amplification account. These results advance the understanding of calling beyond its conventional treatment as a uniformly beneficial motivational resource by showing that its consequences depend on the job context in which it is enacted (Hall and Chandler, 2005). By integrating calling into a curvilinear job design model, this research bridges the literature on work meaning and structural motivation, showing that employees with a strong sense of purpose may respond more strongly to whether role conditions support their valued career goals. In doing so, it advances theory on person-situation fit (e.g., Kristof, 1996) and motivational regulation (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

5.2. Practical implications

The present research offers several actionable insights for HR professionals and hotel leaders seeking to enhance employee creativity

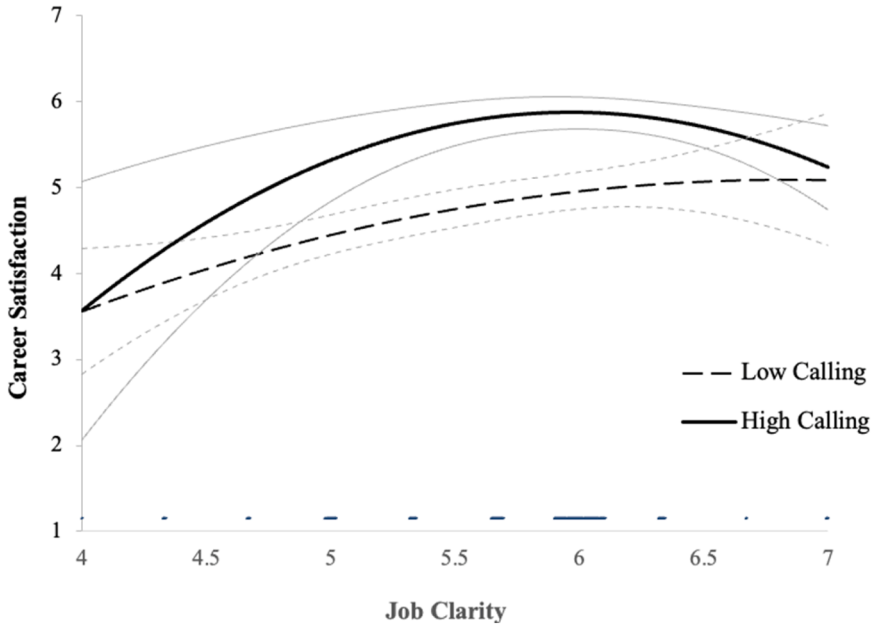


Fig. 4. Curvilinear Effect of Job Clarity on Career Satisfaction by Career Calling Level. *Note.* Fig. 4 presents the conditional curvilinear relationship between job clarity and career satisfaction, plotted following Aiken et al. (1991). The solid and dashed curves represent high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of career calling, respectively. The thin lines indicate the pointwise 95% confidence bands, and the rug marks show the distribution of observations.

Table 5
Conditional Instantaneous Indirect Effects of Job Clarity on Creativity via Career Satisfaction.

	Low (–SD) career calling			High (+SD) career calling		
	Estimate	SE	95%CI[a]	Estimate	SE	95%CI[a]
Low (–SD) job clarity	0.2204	0.0926	[0.0389, 0.4019]	0.3237	0.0998	[0.1281, 0.5193]
High (+SD) job clarity	0.0680	0.0866	[–0.1018, 0.2378]	–0.1626	0.0896	[–0.3382, 0.0130]
Differences	–0.1524	0.1287	[–0.4046, 0.0998]	–0.4864	0.1476	[–0.7757, –0.1971]

Note. $N = 164$.
[a] CI = Confidence interval. 95% CI were calculated using the Monte Carlo method with 20,000 replications.

without sacrificing service consistency. The results suggest that job clarity can guide and motivate employees, but its benefits may not continue to increase at very high levels. Achieving this balance requires not only designing clear systems but also managing how clarity is communicated and enacted in daily operations. At the organizational level, orientation, training, and performance management systems should be designed not merely to add rules, but to help employees understand their responsibilities and performance expectations while preserving discretion in how they respond to complex guest situations. For instance, training can clarify non-negotiable service standards while also creating "judgment zones" in which employees practice handling exceptions, complaints, or emotionally charged encounters within the broader spirit of brand values rather than through fixed scripts (Lan et al., 2025). At the supervisory level, managers play a pivotal role in translating clarity into empowerment. Before providing additional role clarification, managers should consider employees' existing levels of clarity and monitor whether further specification is interpreted as helpful guidance or as s signal of limited trust and discretion (Zheng et al., 2016). Regular developmental feedback and open discussion can help managers clarify expectations without unnecessarily prescribing how every task must be performed. Because scripting and managerial control were not directly measured, our findings do not support a blanket recommendation to reduce SOPs. Rather, managers should preserve clarity about expected outcomes while allowing appropriate flexibility in how employees achieve them (Oldham and Hackman, 2010).

Beyond calibrating clarity itself, HR teams should treat career satisfaction as a broader diagnostic indicator of whether employees perceive their current work arrangements as supporting their longer-term career progress. Because career satisfaction helps transmit the effects of job clarity to creativity, lower career satisfaction may indicate that employees perceive limited opportunities for competence development, career advancement, or career goal attainment—in hospitality operations, employees' day-to-day work experiences may accumulate over time and inform these broader career evaluations (Geng et al., 2014; Zopiatis et al., 2016). To monitor these perceptions, practitioners can embed periodic career-development assessments into existing HR routines. These assessments could cover career satisfaction alongside employees' perceived opportunities for skill development, advancement, and career goal attainment. Stay and exit interviews can help identify whether employees perceive their current work arrangements as supporting their judgment, competence development, and longer-term career progress (Thakur and Srivastava, 2025). Importantly, these tools should not only collect data but also encourage managerial reflection on whether existing job structures support employees' longer-term development. For example, department heads can review results in team meetings and identify where adjustments in job design or task autonomy are needed. Regularly linking career satisfaction trends with creativity or service-recovery indicators can help managers understand whether clarity is still supportive, or whether it is constraining employees' career development and creative contribution.

Hospitality organizations should also pay particular attention to employees with a strong sense of calling—those who see their work as a vocation rather than merely a job. Our findings indicate that these employees reach their highest levels of career satisfaction and creativity when job clarity provides direction, competence support, and space for personal judgment; however, they also experience the sharpest declines at very high levels of perceived clarity. This does not call for fewer rules; detailed procedures may be welcomed when their purpose and contribution to effective guest service are clear. To sustain their engagement, managers should practice autonomy-supportive supervision: involve high-calling employees in refining service standards, explain the "why" behind procedures, and link rules explicitly to brand values and guest experience rather than compliance (Park et al., 2024). Regular coaching and feedback conversations can help align employees' sense of purpose with organizational goals and detect whether highly committed employees perceive insufficient scope to exercise judgment and express their sense of purpose. Allowing employees to lead service-improvement projects, mentor junior staff, or propose new guest-experience initiatives can transform potential frustration into constructive innovation. Prior research shows that autonomy-supportive leadership can enhance intrinsic motivation and creativity (Zhang et al., 2022); in hospitality settings, this means leading through participation, rationale, and trust, rather than control. Ultimately, leaders should aim to affirm rather than regulate employees' sense of purpose. When job clarity reinforces meaning instead of compliance, calling remains a renewable source of energy, creativity, and authentic guest engagement, turning deeply motivated employees into catalysts of service innovation.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the data were collected from mid- to large-scale hotels in China, which are typically characterized by high levels of standardization and formalization. As such, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to less formalized service environments, such as boutique hotels or creative service organizations, where discretion and adaptability are central to performance (Kuhn et al., 2025). In addition, we did not collect detailed information regarding employees' specific job functions and day-to-day responsibilities. This may be important because work characteristics and discretion requirements often vary across jobs and occupations (Parker et al., 2017). Even within the same operational area, some employees (e.g., housekeeping staff) may perform highly standardized tasks governed by detailed procedures, whereas others (e.g., room service employees) may engage in more discretionary activities requiring customer interaction and adaptation. In such roles, very high levels of job clarity may be experienced differently. Future research could therefore examine whether the curvilinear effects observed in the present study vary across specific job functions and task characteristics.

Second, the sample was drawn from a high power-distance, collectivist culture, where employees tend to accept clearly defined roles and hierarchical control (Hofstede, 2001). The threshold at which job clarity shifts from being supportive to becoming constraining may vary in low power-distance, individualistic cultures that emphasize autonomy and personal initiative. Future cross-cultural or multi-country research could test whether the inverted U-shaped relationships and moderated mediation effects observed here hold in Western or culturally diverse contexts, offering a broader view of how cultural values shape responses to job clarity.

Third, this study focused on employees' perceived job clarity and therefore could not determine whether these perceptions reflected the level of role clarity provided by supervisors or the broader organization. This distinction may be important because employees and supervisors can develop different understandings of the same job and work relationship, and the degree of agreement between them can influence employee outcomes (Hsiung and Tsai, 2009; Kim et al., 2017). Job clarity may therefore reflect not only employees' own interpretation of their roles, but also the supervisory and organizational contexts in which those interpretations are formed. However, because hotel affiliation was not retained and within-supervisor clustering was limited, potential dependence at the hotel and supervisor levels could not be estimated reliably. Future research designed to capture clustering at both levels could examine these higher-level influences, while also distinguishing between perceived and more objective indicators of job clarity.

Fourth, although the study employed a multi-source, time-lagged design to reduce inflated relationships associated with mono-method bias, the temporal separation does not by itself establish causality, and the sample size remained relatively modest given the complexity of the moderated curvilinear mediation model. The estimated turning points fell within the observed range (Haans et al., 2015); however, the relatively lower concentration of observations above the turning points

suggests that the declining portions of the curves would benefit from further replication. Although the sensitivity power analysis and Monte Carlo simulations supported the adequacy and stability of the parameter estimates, future research could further strengthen confidence in the findings through larger-sample replications with greater representation at the upper end of job clarity. Experimental research could provide stronger causal evidence. For example, employees could be randomly assigned to low-, intermediate-, or high-clarity conditions by varying the specificity of work goals, responsibilities, and performance evaluation criteria. Researchers could then examine whether career satisfaction and creativity are highest in the intermediate condition and whether career satisfaction accounts for the corresponding pattern in creativity (cf. Shin and Grant, 2021). Perceived autonomy could also be assessed to determine whether it helps explain any decline under the highest-clarity condition.

Fifth, the time-lagged design of the present study cannot fully capture the dynamic evolution of employee experiences. Perceptions of job clarity may fluctuate as employees settle into roles and adapt to new expectations, whereas career satisfaction may evolve more gradually as workplace experiences accumulate and employees progress through different career stages. As a result, the present design captures between-person differences rather than within-person changes, or reciprocal relationships between job clarity and career satisfaction over time. Future studies could employ multi-wave longitudinal designs and latent growth modelling (see Xu and Martinez, 2018) to trace how job clarity and career satisfaction develop jointly over extended periods and to identify when clarity shifts from motivating to constraining across career trajectories.

Finally, the job clarity measure captured employees' understanding of their work goals, responsibilities, and performance evaluation criteria. Although prior role-clarity research has interpreted very high clarity as potentially reflecting micromanagement, restrictiveness, or reduced discretion (Spreitzer et al., 1999; Zheng et al., 2016), these mechanisms were not directly assessed in the present study. The findings therefore establish a nonlinear association between perceived job clarity and employee outcomes, while the control-related explanation remains theoretically grounded but empirically untested. Future research should directly measure role-specification practices, perceived managerial control, and autonomy, alongside job clarity, to determine whether these factors explain the declining side of the relationship. The same caution applies to career calling: although the conditional estimates show stronger curvature among employees with a strong calling, they do not establish why calling amplifies rather than buffers responses to clarity. Qualitative research could more specifically reveal how employees distinguish enabling role guidance from restrictive role specification, and how career calling shapes their responses to these interpretations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dan Zhu: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Seontaik Kim:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Conceptualization. **Qian Meng:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Anh Minh (Jessica) Bui:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Peter B. Kim:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. . Measurement items

Job clarity:

1. I have clear, planned goals and objectives for my job.
2. I know exactly what is expected of me.
3. I know how my performance is going to be evaluated.

Career calling:

1. I believe that I have been called to my current line of work.
2. I believe that a force beyond myself has helped guide me to my career.
3. I was drawn by something beyond myself to pursue my current line of work.
4. I am pursuing my current line of work because I believe I have been called to do so.
5. My work helps me live out my life's purpose.
6. I see my career as a path to purpose in life.
7. My career is an important part of my life's meaning.
8. I try to live out my life purpose when I am at work.
9. The most important aspect of my career is its role in helping to meet the needs of others.
10. Making a difference for others is the primary motivation in my career.
11. My work contributes to the common good.
12. I am always trying to evaluate how beneficial my work is to others.

Career satisfaction:

1. I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career.
2. I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals.
3. I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for income.
4. I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement.
5. I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for the development of new skills.

Creativity (Supervisor-rated):

1. This employee is a good source of highly creative ideas.
2. This employee demonstrates originality in his/her work.
3. This employee suggests radically new ways of doing work.
4. This employee uses previously existing ideas or work in an appropriate new way.
5. This employee is very good at adapting already existing ideas.
6. This employee easily modifies previously existing work processes to suit current needs.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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