



How ambition and commitment influence the career withdrawal intention of hotel employees: A latent change score modeling approach

Dan Zhu^{a,1}, Tin Doan^{b,2}, Pattamol Kanjanakan Thawornlamert^{c,3}, In-Jo Park^{d,e,4}, Peter B. Kim^{a,*,5}

^a School of Hospitality and Tourism, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

^b Department of Leadership and Human Resource Management, Northumbria University, United Kingdom

^c Tourism Management Division, Khon Kaen University International College, Thailand

^d Department of Psychology, Jeonbuk National University, South Korea

^e Center for Coaching Psychology and Research, Jeonbuk National University, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Despite the significant challenges of high turnover and labor shortages in the hospitality industry, the impact of ambition on employees' vocational attitudes remains underexplored. Drawing on self-determination and prospect theories, this research investigated the ways that hotel employees' ambition affected their career withdrawal intention, with career commitment acting as a mediator. Employing latent change score mediation modeling, with longitudinal data collected in four waves over nine months, it was found that changes in ambition levels correlate with changes in career commitment, subsequently affecting change in withdrawal intention. These findings advance the knowledge relating to the mechanisms of ambition, and shift the research focus from a static, between-person perspective, to one that considers the dynamic, within-person changes in vocational attitudes. From a practical perspective, the study contributes to understanding the dynamics of career development and retention strategies in the hospitality industry.

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is characterized by a dynamic, high-pressure work environment, where frontline hotel and restaurant staff are particularly vulnerable to work-life imbalance, emotional labor, and diminished motivation (Croes et al., 2024; Park and Min, 2020). These challenges have contributed to persistently high levels of turnover, with many employees abandoning hospitality as a long-term career path (Cheng and Tung, 2021; Gebbels et al., 2020; Lv et al., 2022). In Australia, the accommodation and food service industry is facing a 51 % staffing shortfall—the highest across all sectors (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Similarly, in 2020, when China's underemployment rate reached a decade-high, hospitality remained among the top five

industries facing the most severe labour shortages (Gu, 2021). Together, these patterns indicate that career withdrawal and labor shortages are threatening workforce stability and the long-term sustainability of the hospitality sector (Zientara et al., 2022). Surprisingly, despite the seriousness of this issue, much of the existing literature has focused on short-term outcomes such as organizational turnover intention or job dissatisfaction (Park and Min, 2020), while relatively little attention has been given to long-term, career-related outcomes (Gebbels et al., 2020). This highlights a critical need for further exploration.

As such, understanding what drives frontline hospitality employees to remain engaged and committed in their careers has become an urgent focus for hospitality researchers (Kusluvan et al., 2022). Ambition is a pivotal motivational construct that propels individuals towards

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: dan.zhu@aut.ac.nz (D. Zhu), tin.doan@northumbria.ac.uk (T. Doan), pattaka@kku.ac.th (P.K. Thawornlamert), park73@jbnu.ac.kr (I.-J. Park), pkim@aut.ac.nz (P.B. Kim).

¹ OICD: 0000-0002-2827-464X

² OICD: 0000-0001-7428-9394

³ OICD: 0000-0002-6587-5532

⁴ OICD: 0000-0001-5493-3824

⁵ OICD: 0000-0003-1063-5264

achieving career success, and, as a facet of a person's personality, embodies their aspirations and drive to excel, particularly within the context of their professional pursuits (Hirschi and Spurk, 2021a). Given the demanding, service-intensive nature of hospitality work, ambition may serve as a psychological resource that assist employees to cope with adversity and maintain career persistence (Holstad et al., 2014). Despite its clear theoretical relevance, ambition has received relatively little attention in hospitality research, particularly regarding its potential role in preventing career exit. Ambition can also drive employees to seek continuous development and acquire new skills, which is essential for navigating the industry's complexities. Those who are ambitious may actively pursue promotions or specialized roles, contributing to talent retention and reducing turnover rates (Hommelhoff et al., 2018). On the other hand, employees lacking ambition may struggle with the high-pressure environment, leading to burnout and a desire to leave the industry. In addition, ambition motivates employees to maintain high performance (Bui et al., 2021). While this contributes to customer satisfaction and business success, it may also reinforce employees' sense of professional pride and purpose (Le et al., 2023), supporting long-term career commitment and reducing intentions to exit the industry.

However, despite growing interest in hospitality workforce sustainability (e.g., Croes et al., 2024; Gebbels et al., 2020), there remains a notable lack of research examining how ambition influences employees' intention to leave. Even in non-hospitality literature, the focus on ambition's influence has predominantly centered around job-related attainment (e.g., income and promotion) and organizational outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction and performance) (Bui et al., 2021; Hirschi and Spurk, 2021b); minimal attention has been given to its predictive power concerning vocational outcomes (Otto et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2024). In particular, the underlying mechanisms through which ambition affects employees' intention to leave their profession remain underexplored, especially in high-turnover sectors such as hospitality, where understanding motivational processes is key to addressing workforce instability (Le et al., 2023).

Apart from this theoretical gap, it is essential to emphasize the need for a longitudinal design in vocational research. A recent meta-analysis (Park and Min, 2020) reveals that most hospitality workforce studies have traditionally adopted a static perspective when investigating turnover intentions—typically examining withdrawal intention and its antecedents at a single point in time. However, such one-time assessments fail to capture the deeper, judgment-driven processes that unfold gradually and shape long-term career decisions (Griffin et al., 2016). These limitations become particularly evident when attempting to establish causal relationships, especially those involving mediation effects and psychological mechanisms. In contrast, examining within-person variance and fluctuations over time can offer valuable insights into the dynamic nature of career withdrawal, as it may shift in response to changing work experiences, personality traits, and motivational states. By employing a longitudinal approach, the aim of this study was to capture the evolving vocational attitudes of hospitality employees, and in so doing, to shed light on the temporal changes that influence their career decisions.

Of the limited number of multi-wave studies on ambition, most employ time-lagged designs in which a person's ambition at one point in time is used to predict vocational attitudes at a later point (e.g., Ghosh, 2023; Hirschi and Spurk, 2021b). However, such designs limit the accurate estimation of the predictor's explanatory power. According to prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), individuals form judgments about future experiences by integrating both current perceptions and prior experiences as temporal frames of reference. To address this methodological limitation, a dynamic longitudinal model that captures within-person fluctuations over time is required (Zacher and Rudolph, 2017). Such a design overcomes the common limitations found in hospitality turnover research and provides a more valid lens through which to examine how changes in ambition shape the evolving vocational attitudes of hospitality employees.

The aim of the current research was to bridge these gaps by conceptualizing "changes in ambition" as a distinct construct, and by examining its effect on subsequent changes in employees' vocational attitudes within the hospitality industry—sectors known for high turnover, and persistent retention challenges (Gebbels et al., 2020). Specifically, the way that changes in ambition influence withdrawal intention was investigated by the introduction of "career commitment" as a mediator, based on the theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000). This theory suggests that intrinsic work motivation and self-management can foster emotional attachment to one's career, enabling individuals to better overcome occupational challenges, increase resilience, and reduce intentions to leave their profession. Methodologically, to ensure the accurate observation of the predictor's explanatory power and to capture unique influences, latent change score (LCS) modeling, an advanced tool for analyzing changes within a person, was employed (Cáncer et al., 2021). This approach was chosen because it models change as a latent construct, enabling a more precise examination of within-person psychological processes than time-lagged methods. Besides, unlike traditional longitudinal approaches such as latent growth modeling, LCS is especially suited to capturing short-term, dynamic shifts in personality, motivation and career attitudes (Li et al., 2014; McArdle, 2009). By acknowledging that individual traits, vocational attitudes and intentions are not static and can change over time, this study aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of career dynamics.

The study is among the first to investigate the role of ambition in influencing career withdrawal intention, addressing a notable gap in the hospitality literature. By identifying the mediating role of career commitment, this study clarifies how ambition reduces career withdrawal intention by strengthening employees' emotional attachment to their profession, thereby further advancing career development theory within the hospitality context. Moreover, it demonstrates the value of using LCS modeling to capture within-person variance and reveal dynamic psychological processes that shape vocational attitudes over time, answering calls for more longitudinal research on career sustainability in hospitality (e.g., Mooney and Jameson, 2018). These insights have practical implications for hospitality HR strategies, such as identifying ambition shifts as early signals of disengagement and tailoring interventions to sustain workforce commitment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Ambition and career withdrawal intention

Ambition, at its core, reflects a person's intrinsic motivation and aspiration to excel in their chosen career by setting goals and strategically planning to achieve them (Hirschi and Spurk, 2021a). According to Elchardus and Smits (2008), individuals describe themselves as 'ambitious' when they 'entertain plans and goals for their professional future' (p. 247). Apart from seeking advancement through job titles or financial rewards, ambition inherently involves a forward-looking mindset—one that identifies both opportunities and challenges along the professional journey. Scholars regard ambition as a construct that drives individuals toward professional achievement and personal fulfillment (Chng and Wang, 2015). This quality is especially relevant in hospitality careers, where navigating unpredictable work demands and a high-turnover culture necessitates sustained internal motivation (Le et al., 2023).

Career withdrawal intention, as defined by Brewer et al. (2018), refers to an individual's inclination to disengage from work responsibilities, resign from their current position, or deviate from their established career path in pursuit of an alternative. In the organizational setting, such intentions may arise from a variety of factors, including job dissatisfaction, burnout, or career plateau (Alcover et al., 2023). These issues are particularly salient in the hospitality industry, which is characterized by irregular and extended working hours, low wages, and limited opportunities for career advancement (Croes et al., 2024; Park

and Min, 2020). The persistent precarity and seasonal instability of many hospitality roles further exacerbate employees' intentions to leave not only their current jobs and but also the profession as a whole (Choy and Kamoche, 2020). In a broader career-related progression context, a person may be grappling with sweeping career transitions (e.g., embracing a novel profession, or nurturing aspirations of self-employment). This trend is evident in the hospitality sector, where frontline employees and even mid-level managers frequently express aspirations to leave the industry in search of careers that offer greater stability, autonomy, and work-life balance (McGinley and Martinez, 2018; Sun et al., 2023).

The theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000) highlights the pivotal role that ambition plays on achieving career success, and accomplishing professional goals. Ambitious individuals seek competence, autonomy and recognitions over the trajectory of their careers, and the desire for success mirrors their career commitment (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Hirschi and Spurk, 2021a). Prior studies have linked ambition to career success (Ashby and Schoon, 2010; Wei et al., 2024) and career satisfaction (El Baroudi et al., 2017), yet these outcomes have rarely been examined in the context of the hospitality industry. Given the industry's high-turnover culture, ambition may function as a critical internal resource that supports sustained employee engagement over time. Accordingly, ambition can be understood as both a catalyst for personal career development and a potential buffer against career exits in hospitality settings.

2.2. The mediating role of career commitment

In the hospitality sector, where roles are often seasonal and transient, and where organizational ties can be short-lived, employees' sense of attachment to their broader profession—rather than to a single employer—can become a key determinant of sustained career engagement (Shigihara, 2018). In such an environment, career commitment plays a pivotal role as an essential factor that can stabilize employees' vocational intentions and align their career aspirations with long-term professional growth (Niu, 2010). Career commitment refers to an employee's dedication and loyalty to their chosen career path, encompassing their long-term goals, aspirations, and investment in professional growth (Gebbels et al., 2020). Unlike organizational commitment, career commitment reflects an individual's commitment to developing and progressing within their profession, regardless of employer (Blau, 1985). Cultivating career commitment is therefore crucial for sustaining hospitality employees' long-term engagement, enhancing service quality, and fostering resilience in the face of challenges—ultimately reducing the likelihood of career withdrawal.

Given the intrinsic motivation embedded in ambition, this study posits that career commitment mediates its influence on employees' intention to leave the profession. Ambition reflects an individual's internal drive for excellence and long-term success (Hirschi and Spurk, 2021a). Such drive often translates into proactive career planning and a sustained pursuit of meaningful goals. In this process, the need for self-realization fosters active engagement with professional goals. And such engagement goes beyond mere commitment to an organization; it involves developing a deep emotional connection with the career path itself (Elchardus and Smits, 2008). This emotional alignment deepens a person's commitment to their career, and leads to resilience and a persistent dedication to their roles, driven by their ambition. In service-intensive sectors such as hospitality, where employees regularly confront occupational stress, ambition may cultivate a deeper vocational identity, reinforcing vocational commitment even in the face of adversity (Le et al., 2023). Indeed, previous studies have demonstrated that ambition has significant impacts on employee vocational commitment (e.g., Desrochers and Dahir, 2000; Hirschi and Spurk, 2021b).

According to Duffy et al. (2011), career commitment plays a critical role in shaping a person's career satisfaction and their likelihood of considering career withdrawal. Those who are strongly committed to

their careers are deeply invested in their professional identity, making them less likely to entertain thoughts of leaving their field. This commitment is often bolstered by ambition, which drives the pursuit of long-term career goals and fosters resilience against challenges (Hommelhoff et al., 2018). Self-determination theory suggests that when a person is committed to their careers, they derive a sense of purpose and fulfillment from their work, which further diminishes the appeal of career withdrawal (Onyishi et al., 2019). Conversely, lower levels of career commitment could lead to a person feeling dissatisfied or misaligned with their professional path, increasing the likelihood of withdrawal intention. However, within the hospitality context, empirical evidence remains limited regarding the sequential process through which ambition fosters career commitment, and, in turn, reduces career withdrawal intentions. This gap constrains our understanding of how personal motivation shapes career-related attitudes in high-turnover service environments (see Harb et al., 2023). Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Ambition would have a positive impact on career commitment.

Hypothesis 2. Career commitment would mediate the relationship between ambition and career withdrawal intention.

2.3. Change-to-change effects: Does within-person change matter?

The present study also aims to investigate the longitudinal relationship between 'ambition' and 'withdrawal intention,' with the mediation of 'career commitment.' While several studies have expanded our understanding of how ambition influences work attitudes over time (e.g., Hirschi and Spurk, 2021a; Otto et al., 2017), evidence for causal relationships remains inconsistent and inconclusive. Abrahams et al. (2023) particularly point out the importance of exploring 'within-person personality variability,' suggesting that traits such as ambition are dynamic and can fluctuate in response to different situations. This emphasizes the need to examine within-person variance, such as changes in ambition over time (e.g., ambition trajectory or shifts).

To illustrate the significance of considering within-person changes, consider a scenario where two employees, A and B, are asked to rate their levels of ambition on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 = 'not at all ambitious', and 7 = 'extremely ambitious'. At the commencement of the year, A chose '3' and B chose '7', but by year's end, they both have identical levels of ambition; A's has improved from 3 to 5, while B's has decreased from 7 to 5. Although A and B show the same levels of ambition toward their careers at the end of the year, it is likely that they will demonstrate different work/life attitudes in the long term, considering their different past experiences (Chen et al., 2011).

Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) offers a relevant lens here. According to this theory, when a person evaluates their current state, they typically have their own personal standards, which they compare with the current situation. It is believed that changes in individuals' states (whether negative or positive) will affect their subsequent attitudes (Zacher and Rudolph, 2017). Empirical evidence supports this perspective. Abrahams et al. (2023) showed that above and beyond the effects of mean level personality, within-person variability in the Big Five personality dimensions (also known as the Five-Factor Model) significantly predicted job performance variance. Similarly, Vossen and Hofmans (2021) found that variability in personality dimensions is associated with work outcomes, including both positive (citizenship behaviors) and negative (counterproductive behaviors) results. These findings demonstrate that changes within an individual's personality, such as ambition, can exert unique influences on organizational and vocational outcomes, supporting the need to account for these fluctuations.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) asserts that intrinsic motivation plays a pivotal role in human behavior. Ambition signifies fervent motivation and pursuit of ambitious career-related

goals and achievements, acting as a catalyst for personal growth and professional success. Over time, this ambition, considered an extended trait of conscientiousness, can evolve as individuals adapt to the realities of work, their expectations, self-motivation, and psychological needs (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). In particular, an increase in ambition fosters a stronger need for autonomy and competence within individuals. Ambition can heighten commitment to a chosen career path (Hirschi and Spurk, 2021b), and the resulting dedication can gradually reduce the likelihood of contemplating career withdrawal. Conversely, a decline in ambition might indicate a struggle to fulfill these needs, leading to reduced commitment and higher withdrawal intentions.

Hence, the authors posited that changes in ambition over time shape employees' emotional attachment to their careers, ultimately influencing their intention to stay or leave. A positive trend in ambition may strengthen employees' perceptions of their future career prospects, deepening their emotional investment in their career path. Conversely, a negative trend may weaken their career outlook, diminishing their emotional attachment and increasing withdrawal intentions. These hypotheses draw on both the dynamic nature of career development and theoretical foundations—namely, prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), which explains how individuals evaluate changes in their career outlook relative to past expectations, and self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), which emphasizes the role of motivation and psychological needs in shaping enduring career trajectories.

Hypothesis 3. Changes in ambition would have a positive impact on changes in career commitment.

Hypothesis 4. Changes in career commitment would mediate the relationship between changes in ambition and changes in career withdrawal intention, such that an increase (decrease) in ambition would lead to an increase (decrease) in career commitment, subsequently leading to a decrease (increase) in career withdrawal intention.

2.4. Modeling within-person change with LCS

To examine how changes in ambition influence vocational attitudes over time, this study employed LCS modeling. Latent Change Score modeling is a longitudinal analytical technique that estimates intra-individual change by modeling it as a latent variable, which allows for the separation of true psychological change from random measurement error (Cáncer et al., 2021). In doing so, it enhances the precision of longitudinal analysis by isolating change processes from statistical artifacts. This method is valuable for capturing dynamic processes such as mediation effects, as it allows researchers to track how individuals' psychological trajectories unfold.

Specifically, unlike traditional longitudinal approaches such as cross-lagged panel models (CLPM)—which often rely on regressing outcomes on prior levels and confound between- and within-person variance, LCS directly models change-to-change/within-person associations (McArdle, 2009). This distinction is essential for studying psychological adjustments, as it allows researchers to estimate how prior levels or changes in a construct predict subsequent change in another. Compared to latent growth curve modeling (LGCM), which focuses on long-term average trends and typically requires more repeated measurements, LCS accommodates fewer time points and does not assume predefined slope patterns (Ferrer and McArdle, 2010), making it well-suited for capturing short-term changes in work-related motivation and attitudes. Moreover, LGCM is correlational and cannot easily identify lagged effects or causal direction. In contrast, LCS is embedded within the structural equation modeling (SEM) framework, allowing researchers to explicitly test directional relationships between latent changes (Cáncer et al., 2021).

Such methodological advantages align with how ambition and vocational attitudes are theorized. Ambition is a future-oriented motivational trait that fluctuates with feedback, challenges, and contextual factors (Wrzus and Roberts, 2016). Similarly, career commitment and withdrawal intention are shaped by evolving perceptions of fit, progress,

and opportunity, making them sensitive to motivational change. Latent Change Score modeling provides a rigorous framework for capturing these fluctuations, aligning well with dynamic vocational theories such as self-determination theory and prospect theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). In sum, LCS is conceptually and methodologically suited for identifying nuanced, person-centered change processes over time. It is an ideal tool for capturing the unfolding dynamics of career-related constructs.

Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model outlining the hypothesized relationships among ambition, career commitment, and withdrawal intentions over time.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

The participants in this study were employees from various departments across a range of hotels located in Henan Province, China. Henan Province was selected due to its growing importance as a tourism and cultural destination in central China. Home to iconic sites such as the Shaolin Temple, Longmen Grottoes, and Yin Ruins, the province has been actively promoted through national and regional tourism development strategies (Hai and Park, 2024; Zhao and Wang, 2021). These efforts have contributed to the rapid expansion of the hotel sector. Meanwhile, China's hospitality industry continues to face widespread career-related challenges, including occupational stigma, labor shortages, and high turnover (Gu et al., 2021; Lv et al., 2022). These workforce issues underscore the importance of examining motivational constructs such as ambition and their relationships with vocational attitudes—particularly career commitment and withdrawal intentions—which are central to understanding and supporting sustainable career development in the hospitality context.

The hotels included mid- to upscale hotels, such as three-star and five-star hotels. The research team, including researchers and research assistants, conducted on-site visits to these hotels. During these visits, they informed hotel managers about the study's objectives and procedures, securing their cooperation. With managerial approval, the research assistants then presented the study details, including its purpose, schedule, and compensation plans, directly to the employees. To promote honest responses, participants were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, with a guarantee that their responses would remain confidential and inaccessible to their supervisors. Employees who expressed willingness to participate signed a consent form, providing their signatures and contact information to receive survey links. Only employees with a minimum of one month's experience in the hospitality sector were eligible to ensure participants had relevant knowledge of the industry. As a result, 335 employees were initially invited to participate. Throughout the data collection phases, follow-up surveys were conducted at three-month intervals to capture longitudinal data, with incentives offered to maintain participation and reduce attrition. The implementation of a 3-month time lag aligns with previous longitudinal studies on personality and career-related topics (Allemand et al., 2024; Volmer et al., 2023).

Out of 335 workers, 320 completed the baseline survey (T1 survey), which assessed T1 ambition and demographic characteristics. These individuals were then invited to participate in the follow-up survey conducted three months later (T2 survey), which measured T2 ambition and T2 career commitment. Among the 320 respondents, 233 completed the T2 survey and were subsequently invited to participate in the second follow-up survey (T3 survey), conducted six months after the initial survey, which measured T3 career commitment and T3 career withdrawal intention. Of these 233 respondents, 194 completed the T3 survey and were invited to participate in the third follow-up survey (T4 survey), conducted nine months after the initial survey, which measured T4 career withdrawal intention. During the survey completion process, participants were asked to provide the last four digits of their phone

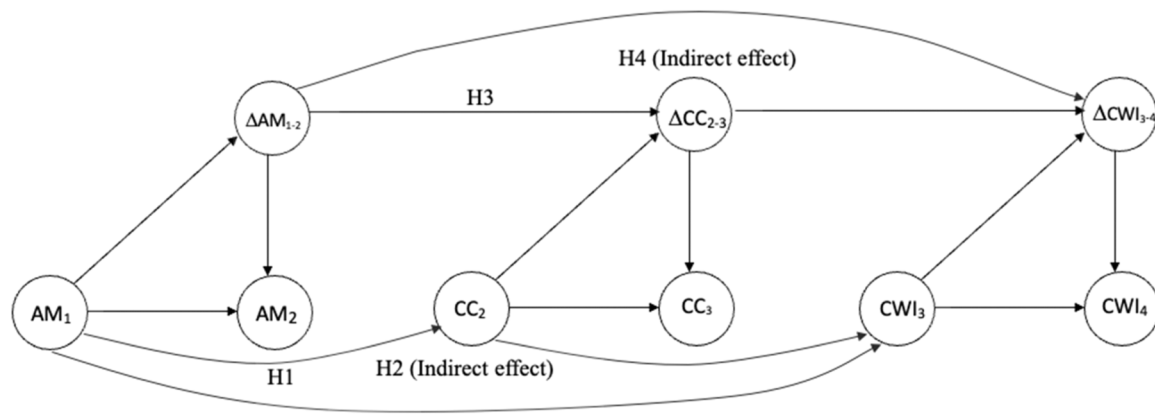


Fig. 1. The Conceptual Model. Note. Conceptual model illustrating the effects of change in Ambition (AM) on change in Career Withdrawal Intention (CWI), mediated by change in Career Commitment (CC).

numbers as an identification code. This code enabled their responses to be linked across the different survey occasions. For each completed questionnaire, participants received a financial reward (RMB 8 yuan).

The final sample comprised 150 hotel employees, all of whom had completed all four time points of the survey. The Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test (Little, 1988) produced a normed χ^2/df of 1.85 (< 2), suggesting that the data were likely missing at random (see Liang et al., 2023). The attrition rate from Time-1 to Time-4 was approximately 46 %, which falls within an acceptable range (see Yin et al., 2023). Of the 150 respondents, 57 were male (38 %) and 93 were female (62 %). The average age was 41 years (Median = 43), with an average career tenure of nine years. Regarding education, most held a high school diploma (41 %), followed by those with national certificates (33 %), while only 7 % had a bachelor's degree. The majority of respondents worked in large-scale hotels (73 %), defined as those with 100 or more employees, and held entry-level positions (73 %). Most respondents (72 %) worked in the accommodation sector, while 23 % were employed in the food and beverage sector.

3.2. Measurements

All scales were initially created in English and then translated into Chinese through the back-translation method (Brislin, 1980). A pilot test involving 10 hospitality workers and three hospitality researchers showed that no major changes were necessary for the translation. All items were assessed using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Ambition was assessed using Hirschi and Spurk's (2021a) five-item scale (Time 1: $\alpha = 0.86$; Time 2: $\alpha = 0.96$), which had previously demonstrated high reliability and validity in other organizational behavior studies (e.g., Sun et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2024) conducted in China. Respondents utilized seven-point Likert scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to rate themselves on five items (questions). An example item is "For me it is very important to achieve outstanding results in my life".

Career commitment was measured using Blau's (1985) seven-item scale (Time 2: $\alpha = 0.95$; Time 3: $\alpha = 0.96$). Respondents utilized seven-point Likert scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to rate themselves on the seven items. An example item is "This is the ideal vocation for a life work".

Career withdrawal intention was assessed based on Blau's (1985) three-item scale (Time 3: $\alpha = 0.97$; Time 4: $\alpha = 0.97$). Respondents utilized seven-point Likert scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to rate themselves on the three items. An example item is "I am actively searching for a new occupation in a different industry".

A Harman's single-factor test was performed to assess the presence of common method variance (CMV). The results show that the percentage

of variance for a single factor was lower than the cut-off value of 50 %. Furthermore, when compared with the proposed model, the fit statistics for the single-factor test were unacceptable. These findings suggest that common method bias is not likely a major concern in this study (see Podsakoff et al., 2003).

3.3. Data analysis

Traditionally, the difference scores (change) between two consecutive observations were simply calculated utilizing the observed data (i.e., $X_t - X_{t-1}$). However, this method can be statistically problematic as it does not take residuals (e.g., measurement errors), into account (Cáncer et al., 2021). Latent change score modeling enables researchers to overcome such limitations. The equations used in LCS modeling can be expressed as follows:

$$X_{[t]} = 1 \times X_{[t-1]} + 1 \times \Delta X_{[t]} + e$$

$$\Delta X_{[t]} = \beta_{[t-1]} X_{[t-1]}$$

The first equation shows that X at time t is modeled as a function of X at a prior time (i.e., X_{t-1}), change in X (i.e., ΔX_t) and residuals (e.g., measurement error). In the context of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), given that the paths of X_t with X_{t-1} and ΔX_t have no coefficients, these paths were fixed at 1 (Cáncer et al., 2021). Thus, the latent variable could be predicted by X at the prior time point (X_{t-1}) through a self-feedback regression parameter (also known as an autoregressive parameter) β_{t-1} (see the second equation). Treating change in X as a distinct latent variable enabled researchers to split the true change values from residuals. This allowed the possibility that ΔX_t as a latent variable, could also be used to predict a particular outcome variable (Y), or even the latent change in that outcome variable (ΔY).

Consistent with the practice of extant longitudinal studies (e.g., Zacher and Rudolph, 2017), the LCS model (See Fig. 2 below) in the current research was created and tested using the SEM software, Mplus 8.3. In order to establish three latent variables, the paths of T2 ambition (AM_2) with T1 ambition (AM_1) and change in ambition (ΔAM_{1-2}), the paths of T3 career commitment (CC_3) with T2 career commitment (CC_2) and change in career commitment (ΔCC_{2-3}), and the paths of T4 career withdrawal intention (CWI_4) with T3 career withdrawal intention (CWI_3) and change in career withdrawal intention (ΔCWI_{3-4}), were fixed at 1. In contrast, the influence of AM_1 on ΔAM_{1-2} , the influence of CC_2 on ΔCC_{2-3} , and the influence of CWI_3 on ΔCWI_{3-4} , were calculated.

In the context of SEM and to test the mediation effect, the model also took into consideration the influence of AM_1 and ΔAM_{1-2} on CC_2 , the influence of CC_2 and ΔCC_{2-3} on CWI_3 , the influence of AM_1 and ΔAM_{1-2} on CWI_3 , and more importantly, the influence of ΔAM_{1-2} on ΔCC_{2-3} , the influence of ΔCC_{2-3} on ΔCWI_{3-4} , and the influence of ΔAM_{1-2} on

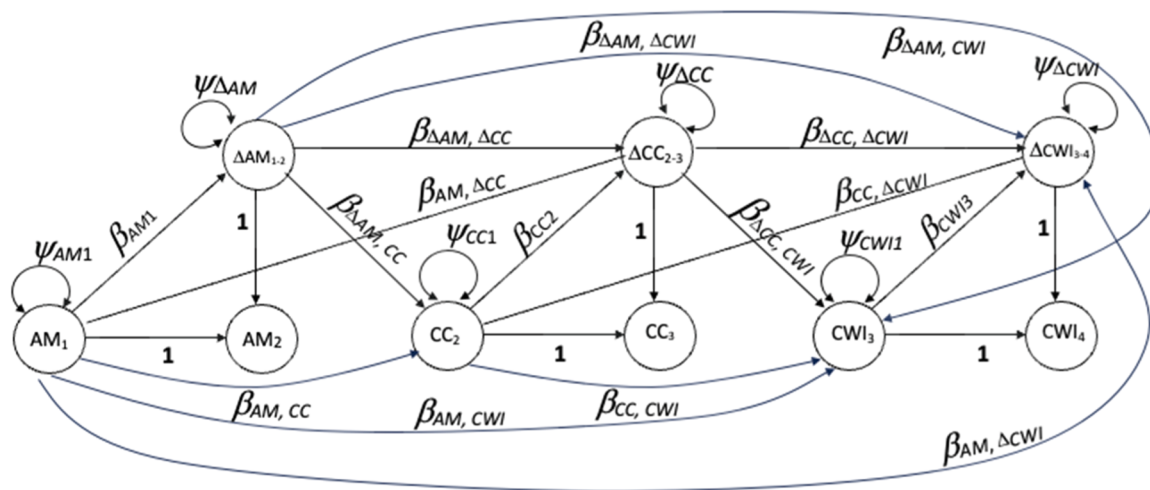


Fig. 2. The Proposed Latent Change Score Model. Note. AM=Ambition; CC=Career Commitment; CWI=Career Withdraw Intention.

ΔCWI_{3-4} . Considering the latent confounding effects from between-person characteristics, the influence of AM_1 on ΔCC_{2-3} and ΔCWI_{3-4} , and the influence of CC_2 on ΔCWI_{3-4} , were also assessed. Age, gender and tenure were assessed as control variables. Finally, the bias-corrected 95 % confidence intervals of the indirect effects (H2: $\text{AM} \rightarrow \text{CC} \rightarrow \text{CWI}$; H4: $\Delta\text{AM} \rightarrow \Delta\text{CC} \rightarrow \Delta\text{CWI}$) were examined to evaluate the mediating hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics and discriminant validity

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the variables of interest. The proposed LCS model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 [458] = 909$, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90). Longitudinal measurement invariance was assessed to ensure that the observed relationships were not due to changes in the measurement of the constructs. Analyses for configural and metric invariance were conducted, and the measures demonstrated adequate stability over time to proceed with the subsequent change analyses (AM: $\Delta\chi^2 (\text{df}) = 5.255 (4)$, $p > 0.05$; CC: $\Delta\chi^2 (\text{df}) = 12.647 (6)$, $p > 0.05$; CWI: $\Delta\chi^2 (\text{df}) = 0.996(2)$, $p > 0.05$).

4.2. Hypothesis testing

Fig. 3 illustrates the paths in the model and the associated regression coefficients. Table 2 presents the estimates and confidence intervals for the indirect effects. Regarding H1, Fig. 3 demonstrates that T1 ambition positively affected T2 career commitment ($\beta = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn, had a negative influence on T3 career withdrawal intention ($\beta = -0.61$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, as shown in Table 2, the indirect effect of T1 ambition on T3 career withdrawal intention via T2 career commitment was significant (point estimate = -0.39 , $p < 0.001$), and its bias-

corrected 95 % confidence interval $[-0.55, -0.23]$ did not include zero. Hence, H1 and H2 were supported.

Fig. 3 also shows that regarding H3, change in ambition from T1 to T2, positively affected change in career commitment, from T2 to T3 ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$), which in turn, had a negative influence on change in career withdrawal intention, from T3 to T4 ($\beta = -0.26$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, as shown in Table 2, the indirect effect of change in ambition from T1 to T2 on change in career withdrawal intention from T3 to T4 via change in career commitment from T2 to T3, was significant (point estimate = -0.10 , $p < 0.05$), and its bias-corrected 95 % confidence interval $[-0.19, -0.01]$ did not include zero. Specifically, the results of the LCS modeling suggest that increases (decreases) in ambition were significant and positively associated with subsequent increases (decreases) in career commitment, which in turn, led to subsequent decreases (increases) in career withdrawal intention. Hence, both H3 and H4 were supported. The results of this model were similar both with and without the inclusion of the control variables.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine how employee ambition might impact desire to leave a career, focusing on the mediating role of career commitment. Based on LCS modeling, and by analyzing the within-person changes over time, this research revealed that an increase in participant ambition resulted in positive changes in career commitment, which in turn resulted in a decrease in the intention to withdraw from current careers. Grounded in self-determination theory and prospect theory, these findings offer valuable insights for hospitality researchers and practitioners seeking to address the persistent challenges of high turnover and labor shortages in the sector.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	M	SD	CA	CR	AVE	AM-T1	AM-T2	CC-T2	CC-T3	CWI-T3	CWI-T4
AM-T1	5.79	0.73	0.86	0.85	0.57	1					
AM-T2	5.70	0.66	0.80	0.82	0.52	0.54**	1				
CC-T2	5.12	1.20	0.95	0.95	0.74	0.30**	0.57**	1			
CC-T3	5.11	1.12	0.96	0.96	0.76	0.34**	0.58**	0.73**	1		
CWI-T3	2.79	1.52	0.97	0.97	0.90	-0.21**	-0.37**	-0.47**	-0.60**	1	
CWI-T4	2.87	1.46	0.97	0.97	0.91	-0.30**	-0.36**	-0.53**	-0.60**	0.57**	1

Note: CA = Cronbach's Alpha reliability, CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted; AM = Ambition, CC = Career commitment, CWI = Career withdrawal intention.

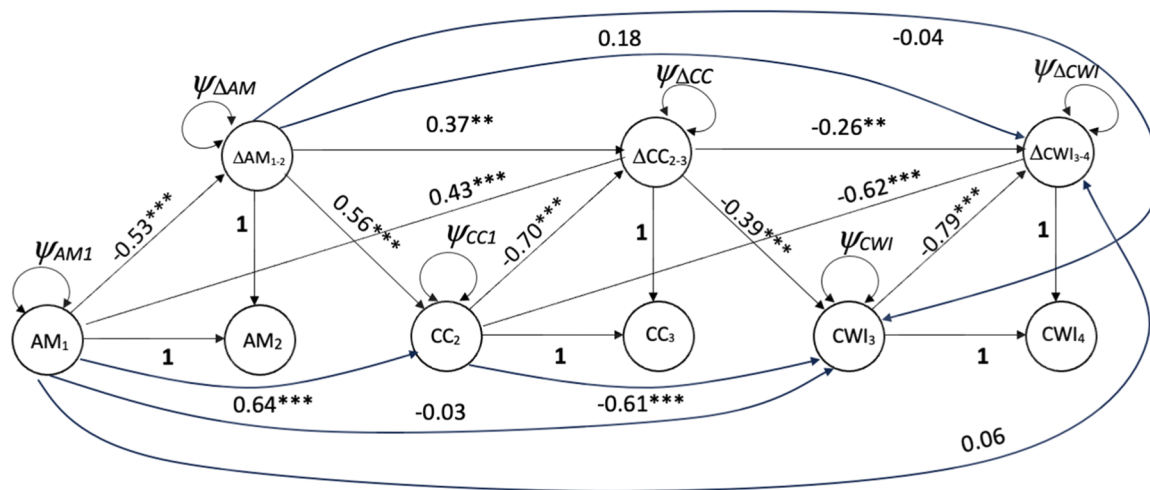


Fig. 3. The Findings of Latent Change Score Model. Note. AM=Ambition; CC=Career Commitment; CWI=Career Withdraw Intention.

Table 2

Estimates and confidence intervals for the indirect effects of ambition and change in ambition.

Direct effect	Indirect effect				
	Estimate	S.E.	Point estimate	95 %CI	
AM _{T1} → CWI _{T3}	-0.03	0.11	AM _{T1} → CC _{T2} → CWI _{T3}	-0.39***	[-0.55, -0.23]
AM _{T1} → CC _{T2}	0.64***	0.08			
CC _{T2} → CWI _{T3}	-0.61***	0.10			
ΔAM ₁₋₂ → ΔCWI ₃₋₄	0.18	0.11	ΔAM ₁₋₂ → ΔCC ₂₋₃ → ΔCWI ₃₋₄	-0.10*	[-0.19, -0.01]
ΔAM ₁₋₂ → ΔCC ₂₋₃	0.37**	0.11			
ΔCC ₂₋₃ → ΔCWI ₃₋₄	-0.26**	0.09			

Note: AM = Ambition, CC = Career commitment, CWI = Career withdrawal intention.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Unlike other personality traits that have been extensively examined in the hospitality context—such as those highlighted in recent meta-analysis by Doan et al. (2021)—ambition remains comparatively underexplored. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this research is among the first to empirically examine the influence of employees' ambition on vocational outcomes, and in particular, career withdrawal intention. By doing so, this study shifts focus from such traditional organizational outcomes as organizational commitment and performance (Bui et al., 2021; Hirschi and Spurk, 2021b), and advances understanding of the impact of ambition from a career development perspective. This is particularly timely given the increasing number of individuals leaving the hospitality profession (Gebbers et al., 2020; Park and Min, 2020), and the high attrition rates that threaten the service continuity. Cheng and Tung (2021) also identified ambition as a relevant theme in their qualitative study of hospitality employees who left the industry. However, their findings are based on retrospective accounts, where ambition was often recognized only after workers experienced a misfit with limited career prospects. In contrast, the longitudinal quantitative design of the current study captures ambition as a dynamic, evolving construct that predicts withdrawal intention before the actual exit occurs. This process-oriented perspective offers earlier insights into disengagement and highlights ambition as an active driver of vocational

attitudes (see Matusik et al., 2020). Together, both studies underscore the role of ambition in career decisions, but from different vantage points. Future studies could build on these findings by further investigating the role of ambition in shaping long-term career decisions among hospitality employees.

This study extends hospitality career literature by elucidating the psychological mechanism through which ambition influences career retention decisions. Built on self-determination theory, the results of show that ambitious employees are highly committed to their careers, reducing the likelihood of withdrawal from positions in which they have already built up their skills and profiles. These findings resonate with previous studies incorporating self-determination theory, which have found that intrinsic motivation can help hospitality employees derive greater career satisfaction and psychological resilience (Lee et al., 2016; Sharma and Akram, 2024). Additionally, this study utilized longitudinal data to offer a more persuasive demonstration of the dynamic psychological processes at play between ambition, and career withdrawal intention. Whereas prior research has often treated ambition as uniformly beneficial (e.g., career success; Otto et al., 2017) or directly linked to organizational outcomes (e.g., job performance; Bui et al., 2021), the present findings reveal that its influence is indirect—operating through evolving career commitment. In other words, ambition alone may be insufficient to sustain engagement; its beneficial effects appear contingent on whether it fosters a sense of purpose and alignment with one's career goals. This reframes ambition not as a guaranteed route to success, but as a motivational force that requires psychological reinforcement to guard against career disengagement. The confirmation of career commitment, thus, contributes to a better understanding of the theoretical connection between ambition and withdrawal intention.

Furthermore, this study provides a significant methodological contribution, in that it is among the first in the literature to examine the effect of ambition using LCS modeling. While extant hospitality studies on the influence of personality on organizational/vocational attitudes/behavior have generally adopted a cross-sectional, or time-lagged design (from a between-person perspective) (Doan et al., 2021), the present study has taken both between-person and within-person perspectives into consideration. By using LCS modeling, this study has unveiled the necessity of taking within-person change into consideration (Haenggli et al., 2021). It captures the dynamic effects of within-person change in ambition on subsequent changes in career commitment, demonstrating that fluctuations in ambition over time uniquely impact career commitment, beyond the static level of ambition. This dynamic relationship underscores how increases or decreases in ambition can directly shape career commitment trajectories, which in turn influence changes

in career withdrawal intention. The findings provide empirical evidence supporting the view that employees' personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, emotional intelligence) are malleable and can develop over time (Wang et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). This reinforces the need for hospitality researchers to apply dynamic models when examining such constructs and highlights the practical value of designing interventions that strengthen and sustain motivational traits. In other words, what matters for vocational engagement is not merely the level of ambition, but whether that ambition is sustained and translated into purposeful action.

As such, this research suggests that focusing solely on static or average ambition may obscure its evolving influence—particularly for individuals whose ambition starts high (or low) but changes significantly over time. Prior studies (e.g., Bui et al., 2021; Zuo et al., 2022), by relying on cross-sectional data, have implicitly treated ambition as a relatively stable trait, thereby overlooking its potential responsiveness to contextual enablers or setbacks. For researchers aiming to investigate within-person change and identify causal relationships, latent change score (LCS) modeling offers a valuable approach. Unlike cross-sectional designs that capture only a moment in time, longitudinal methods such as LCS can detect fluctuations in key variables and model change-on-change relationships. This is especially useful in uncovering how shifts in personal attributes (e.g., ambition) affect work attitudes and career trajectories over time. Ultimately, this study reinforces the importance of capturing within-person variance and responds directly to Haenggli et al.'s (2021) and Mooney and Jameson's (2018) call for more dynamic approaches in career development research.

5.2. Practical implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for hospitality practitioners, as well as career counselors. The results suggest that employees with higher levels of ambition are less likely to express career withdrawal intentions. Ambition can be assessed during recruitment and internal promotion using validated psychometric tools such as the Ambition Scale by Hirschi and Spurk (2021a). Identifying low ambition at the entry stage may help flag candidates who are more vulnerable to disengagement. In parallel, situational observation can provide additional insight—for example, by inviting staff to lead short team briefings, propose guest service innovations, or conduct peer-to-peer skills workshops (Wei et al., 2024). Employees who voluntarily step into these roles and seek responsibility signal strong upward motivation. In collectivist cultural settings, where employees may be reluctant to express ambition directly, managers could create low-pressure, informal feedback channels, such as “coffee chats with supervisors” or casual, off-work gatherings (Huang et al., 2023).

Importantly, this study reveals that ambition is not static. The observed within-person fluctuations suggest that ambition can evolve over time. Hospitality managers should therefore create environments that foster and sustain ambition. For example, assigning ambitious employees to pre-opening teams or service recovery initiatives may offer autonomy and challenge—both of which are known to reinforce motivation. Such targeted interventions enable ambitious employees to align personal goals with organizational opportunities, thereby enhancing both motivation and retention (Chang and Busser, 2020). Lastly, sustaining ambition also necessitates protective mechanisms. In service-intensive roles prone to emotional exhaustion and customer mistreatment, managers must ensure that employees' ambition is met with adequate support and recognition. Research shows that commitment-focused recognitions—such as certificates, plaques, or personalized thank-you messages following challenging service encounters—can appeal to ambitious employees (Wang et al., 2024).

The study's findings suggest that ambitious employees are less likely to leave their careers when they feel committed to their roles. This underscores the need for hotel managers to create an environment that supports both ambition and career commitment through structured

development strategies. First, clear career pathways—detailing progression from entry-level to managerial roles, along with required skills and timelines—can offer ambitious employees a roadmap for advancement (Preko and Anyigba, 2022). Periodic workshops or internal forums can further raise awareness of these pathways and demonstrate organizational investment in long-term growth. In addition, cultivating the career commitment of ambitious employees also requires strengthening their self-efficacy and resilience (Hwang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Managers can boost confidence by sharing customer compliments during shift briefings. Fostering a psychologically safe, error-tolerant climate encourages learning from mistakes without fear of judgment, helping to sustain ambition in high-pressure service contexts. Together, these practices convert ambition into sustained career engagement, and reduce the risk of career withdrawal.

Finally, the results of the LCS modeling not only demonstrate the positive effects of ambition and career commitment but also reveal the dynamic nature of these constructs over time. These findings underscore the need for hospitality organizations to employ multi-wave surveys. Such approaches provide a more accurate, time-sensitive understanding of how employees' ambition and commitment fluctuate, allowing organizations to identify critical intervention points. For instance, by tracking these trends, HR managers can pinpoint when employees are experiencing declines in ambition and implement targeted strategies. In such cases, HR managers should initiate open communication to understand employees' evolving career development needs and provide specific feedback on areas for growth (Chung and D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). In addition, organizations can activate internal mobility and succession planning frameworks—for instance, by assigning plateaued but capable employees to shadow leadership roles, or by rotating task forces to reignite motivation (Mooney et al., 2016). Empowering staff to assume specialized roles—such as serving as brand ambassadors—can foster a renewed sense of purpose and emotional attachment. Such individualized and timely strategies help ensure that ambition and commitment are not merely monitored but actively sustained, thereby promoting long-term retention.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

The study has several limitations which offer avenues for future research. Firstly, all variables were measured using self-reports, potentially introducing bias, despite efforts on behalf of the researchers to mitigate common method variance through a multi-wave survey design. Secondly, the study focused solely on two outcome variables of ambition: career commitment and career withdrawal intention, neglecting potential negative effects or other outcomes of ambition. For example, using the ability-motivation-opportunity model, Ghosh (2023) found that ambitious employees may develop deviant behavior (e.g., unethical pro-organizational behavior) when they perceive high levels of descriptive and injunctive norms in their places of work. Therefore, future research could explore additional outcomes of ambition and their associated boundary conditions, to enrich the current stage of understanding. Additionally, the current study did not involve possible personal or contextual factors that could prompt increases or decreases in the ambition trajectory. For instance, a company with performance-based promotion might exhibit increased levels of ambition among its employees, whereas a company with seniority-based promotion could exhibit decreased levels (Horak and Yang, 2019).

Caution should be taken in generalizing the findings across cultural and industry contexts. This study was conducted in China—a collectivist culture, where cultural norms may shape how ambition relates to career attitudes. In individualistic societies (e.g., the U.S., or the U.K.), ambition often emphasizes personal success, autonomy, and rapid upward mobility, potentially strengthening its link to career commitment as individuals pursue self-directed goals (Wong and Cheng, 2019). In contrast, in collectivist settings such as China, the relationship may also be shaped by external expectations (e.g., family or

organizational/societal obligations). As a result, individuals may show relatively lower commitment to career paths driven by personal aspirations when these diverge from socially expected trajectories. Moreover, as this study focused solely on the hotel sector, the findings may not generalize to other hospitality contexts such as restaurants. For instance, hotels typically offer more structured promotion systems and formalized career ladders, whereas restaurants often feature flatter hierarchies and shorter job tenures, resulting in fewer opportunities for upward mobility or long-term planning (Wang et al., 2011). In such environments, the inhibitory effect of career commitment on withdrawal intention may be weaker. Future research could adopt cross-cultural and cross-sectoral designs to examine how ambition operates across different sectors and value systems.

Lastly, while the study's longitudinal design yielded valuable insights into the dynamic nature of employee ambition and vocational attitudes, the methodological rigor could be enhanced in several ways. While the four-wave, nine-month design captured short-term fluctuations, a longer time frame—such as 12–18 months—would offer greater temporal scope to observe more enduring changes in motivational and career-related outcomes (Li et al., 2016). Indeed, certain vocational processes—such as commitment, burnout or absenteeism, and turnover intention—may develop gradually and become more salient over extended periods (see withdrawal progression theory; Krausz et al., 1998). Extending the observation window would therefore, better align with the temporal dynamics of vocational behavior.

Additionally, the inclusion of more measurement waves would support the application of latent growth curve modeling (LGCM) and time series analyses, enabling the detection of non-linear developmental trajectories (e.g., accelerating effect) (Michel et al., 2021). Such designs offer a more comprehensive picture of how ambition unfolds across different career stages. While LCS modeling strengthens temporal inference by capturing change-to-change associations, future research could enhance causal understanding by incorporating experimental design (see Li et al., 2021). For example, ambition-enhancing interventions could be implemented and tracked over time to determine their impact on career attitudes and persistence.

Although this study considered both within- and between-person variance, it did not account for team-level influences. Given that the influence of ambition may be either reinforced or constrained by team climate and leadership dynamics, such as competitive norms (Sun et al., 2024), future research could adopt multilevel designs to examine how these team-level contextual factors shape the effects of ambition. Finally, while ambition change was modeled over time, the sample primarily comprised employees with established work experience. Examining newcomers or early-career hospitality staff may offer additional insight into how ambition evolves during initial industry exposure (see Holtom et al., 2013). Future research could explore whether early ambition acts as a buffer against initial disengagement or becomes a liability when unmet by developmental opportunities.

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.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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