

# Exploring the Causes of Employee Turnover in the Hospitality Industry

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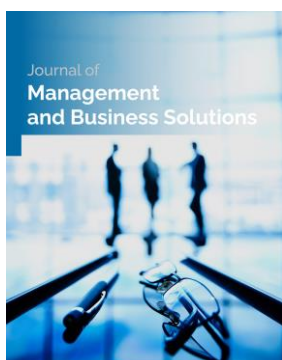
## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the underlying causes of employee turnover in the hospitality industry by examining the lived experiences of former and current hospitality workers in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from 24 participants working across hotels, restaurants, and catering businesses in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in role, experience, and gender. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, and NVivo software was utilized for data management, coding, and theme development. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through member checking and peer debriefing. Three major themes emerged: (1) Organizational Factors such as ineffective leadership, inadequate compensation, lack of career development, job insecurity, and poor work-life balance; (2) Interpersonal and Social Factors including managerial conflict, poor colleague relations, customer misconduct, and workplace discrimination; and (3) Personal and Psychological Factors such as burnout, job dissatisfaction, mismatch with career goals, psychological distress, and lack of motivation. Participant quotations highlighted the emotional and contextual complexities behind turnover decisions. These findings were aligned with prior research, emphasizing both universal and region-specific causes of turnover in the hospitality sector. Employee turnover in the hospitality industry is a multifactorial issue rooted in structural, social, and psychological dynamics. To improve retention, hospitality organizations must adopt holistic strategies that address compensation, leadership, work culture, and employee well-being. The study contributes to the literature by offering culturally contextualized insights from the Iranian hospitality workforce and suggests targeted interventions for long-term workforce stability.

**Keywords:** Employee turnover; hospitality industry; qualitative research; organizational factors; burnout; job satisfaction; Iran; NVivo; thematic analysis; workforce retention.

## Introduction

Employee turnover has become a pressing challenge for the global hospitality industry, impacting organizational sustainability, service quality, and profitability. The dynamic, labor-intensive nature of the hospitality sector, coupled with its reputation for precarious working conditions, renders it particularly susceptible to high rates of staff attrition. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), the annual turnover rate in the accommodation and food services industry consistently exceeds 70%, a statistic that reflects a persistent and global phenomenon. In countries such as Iran, where the hospitality industry is undergoing gradual development amidst economic volatility, understanding the causes of turnover is not only critical for operational efficiency but also for workforce stability and sectoral growth.



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Turnover, defined as the voluntary or involuntary departure of employees from an organization, entails substantial costs—both direct and indirect—including recruitment expenses, training investment loss, productivity reduction, and the degradation of service standards (Hom, Lee, Shaw, & Hausknecht, 2017). In the context of the hospitality sector, where service delivery is inseparable from human interaction, the loss of experienced staff can compromise guest satisfaction and institutional reputation (Cho, Woods, Jang, & Erdem, 2006). Despite an expanding body of literature on employee turnover, much of the existing research has employed quantitative methods, often failing to capture the complex, subjective, and context-dependent reasons that drive hospitality workers to leave their jobs. Consequently, qualitative inquiry is essential for exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of hospitality employees to understand the deeper psychological, social, and organizational causes of turnover.

Several theoretical models have been proposed to explain employee turnover, including the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), the job embeddedness theory (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001), and the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989). While these frameworks have offered valuable insights, their applicability within the hospitality sector is often limited due to contextual factors such as irregular working hours, emotional labor, and the seasonality of employment. The unfolding model, for instance, posits that turnover results from a “shock” that triggers a reassessment of job satisfaction or alignment with personal goals. In hospitality settings, such shocks may manifest as sudden scheduling changes, managerial conflict, or customer abuse—each capable of disrupting employees’ psychological contract with their employer.

Empirical studies have consistently highlighted multiple dimensions contributing to turnover in hospitality, including organizational, interpersonal, and personal factors. Organizational drivers such as low pay, lack of promotion opportunities, job insecurity, and excessive workloads are among the most commonly cited causes (Yang, Wan, & Fu, 2012; Karatepe & Uludag, 2008). For example, Yang et al. (2012) found that perceived unfairness in compensation and the absence of a structured career path significantly predicted turnover intentions among hotel employees in China. In parallel, studies in Middle Eastern contexts have shown that organizational justice, leadership style, and inadequate employee involvement play a decisive role in staff retention (Amin, Aldakhil, Wu, & Cobanoglu, 2017). These findings suggest that systemic structural and managerial deficiencies can demoralize employees and contribute to their decision to exit the organization.

Interpersonal and social factors also exert a powerful influence on employee retention. Poor relationships with supervisors, conflict with coworkers, and a hostile organizational culture have been identified as strong predictors of employee withdrawal behavior (Deery & Jago, 2015). In hospitality environments where teamwork and communication are essential, negative social dynamics can quickly erode morale. Moreover, the role of customer incivility and harassment has received growing attention. Employees exposed to abusive guest behavior without sufficient managerial protection often report emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and eventual withdrawal (Kim, Ro, Hutchinson, & Kwun, 2014). These findings underscore the need for organizational mechanisms that safeguard employees from both internal and external sources of stress.

Beyond organizational and interpersonal variables, individual-level psychological and personal factors are integral to understanding turnover behavior. Job burnout, defined as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress, is frequently associated with turnover among hospitality staff (Karatepe, 2013). The nature of hospitality work—requiring long hours, constant emotional regulation, and physical exertion—makes employees particularly vulnerable to burnout. Furthermore, factors such as work-life conflict, lack of meaning or purpose in the job, and mismatch between career aspirations and job characteristics are commonly cited in

qualitative studies (Tews, Michel, & Ellingson, 2013). These elements highlight the personal struggles faced by many workers, who often enter the industry as a temporary solution rather than a long-term career plan.

The Iranian hospitality industry presents a unique context for examining turnover due to its rapidly evolving service sector, socio-economic challenges, and cultural factors. With tourism development identified as a national economic priority, there is increasing demand for a stable and skilled hospitality workforce (Gholipour, Allahyari, & Tajeddin, 2020). However, high turnover rates remain a significant obstacle. Hospitality jobs in Iran are often stigmatized as low-status roles, offering limited social mobility and career prospects (Sharifzadeh, 2018). Moreover, the industry is characterized by unstable employment arrangements, low wages, and weak labor protections. These challenges are compounded by the broader economic climate marked by inflation, sanctions, and limited job alternatives, all of which influence employee decisions to leave their roles in search of more secure or meaningful opportunities.

Despite these pressing concerns, there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring the multifaceted reasons for employee turnover in the Iranian hospitality sector. Most existing studies in Iran have focused on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or service quality using survey-based designs (Ahranjani, 2019). While such approaches offer valuable quantitative insights, they are limited in capturing the depth of employee experiences and the interplay of emotional, social, and structural factors. Therefore, there is a critical need for qualitative exploration that foregrounds the voices of hospitality workers and contextualizes their turnover decisions within the unique socio-cultural and economic realities of the Iranian labor market.

This study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative research design to explore the underlying causes of employee turnover in the hospitality industry in Tehran. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research aims to identify the organizational, interpersonal, and psychological drivers of turnover from the perspective of those directly affected. By focusing on employee narratives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the retention crisis in hospitality and offers practical recommendations for managers, policymakers, and human resource professionals seeking to improve workforce stability. Furthermore, the findings may serve as a foundation for developing context-sensitive strategies that enhance employee well-being, job satisfaction, and long-term commitment in the hospitality sector.

## **Methods and Materials**

### *Study Design and Participants*

This study employed a qualitative research design with an exploratory approach to investigate the underlying causes of employee turnover in the hospitality industry. Given the complexity and contextual nature of employee turnover, qualitative methodology was deemed most suitable for capturing the nuanced, lived experiences and perceptions of hospitality employees. Participants were purposefully selected from various hospitality establishments in Tehran, including hotels, restaurants, and catering services. The inclusion criteria required that participants had either recently left a hospitality job or had significant insights into the reasons behind employee departures.

A total of 24 participants were interviewed, consisting of both former employees and human resource professionals who had direct knowledge of turnover patterns. Maximum variation sampling was used to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, job roles, and years of experience, enhancing the richness and transferability of

the data. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, the point at which no new themes or insights were emerging from the interviews.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore predetermined topics while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on relevant experiences. The interview protocol included open-ended questions such as: “What motivated you to leave your position?” “What role did management or work conditions play in your decision?” and “How do you perceive the hospitality industry’s work environment?” Follow-up probes were used to explore emerging areas of interest.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted in a private setting, either in person or via secure video conferencing when necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the process.

### *Data analysis*

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The coding and analysis process was supported by NVivo software, which facilitated the systematic organization and retrieval of data.

An inductive approach guided the coding process, allowing categories and themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Peer debriefing and member checking were used to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Furthermore, an audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency and dependability in analytical decisions.

## **Findings and Results**

Thematic analysis of the interview data yielded three overarching themes: organizational factors, interpersonal and social factors, and personal and psychological factors, each encompassing several subthemes. These findings reflect the complex and multifaceted causes of employee turnover in the hospitality industry, as articulated by the 24 participants.

### **Theme 1: Organizational Factors**

**Ineffective Leadership.** Many participants pointed to poor leadership as a central reason for their departure. They described experiences of micromanagement, lack of guidance, and unresponsive supervisors. One participant shared, “My manager never listened to our suggestions. He just imposed rules without any explanation.” The absence of mentorship and constructive feedback created a demotivating environment.

**Inadequate Compensation.** Employees frequently cited low and irregular wages as a core issue. Several reported that their salaries did not reflect the volume or intensity of their labor. As one former hotel receptionist explained, “I worked 12-hour shifts and earned barely enough to cover my rent. Bonuses were promised but never paid.” The lack of financial stability contributed to job dissatisfaction and exit decisions.

**Lack of Career Development.** The absence of training programs, professional growth opportunities, and promotion paths was widely acknowledged. Participants felt stuck in stagnant roles. One worker stated, “No matter

how hard I worked, there was no chance for advancement. It was just the same job every day.” The lack of skill-building or career planning dissuaded employees from long-term commitment.

**Job Insecurity.** Unstable contracts and the constant fear of layoffs contributed to high turnover. Several participants noted that management frequently hired on short-term or verbal agreements, leaving employees uncertain about their future. “We were always told our jobs could be gone next month,” a kitchen staff member recalled.

**Poor Work-Life Balance.** Excessive work hours, inflexible schedules, and lack of rest days were common complaints. One participant remarked, “I missed every family event for two years. There were no weekends or holidays off.” The demanding nature of the job often conflicted with personal needs, leading to burnout.

**Misaligned Organizational Culture.** Participants reported feeling disconnected from the values and priorities of their employers. Many described a toxic atmosphere where profit was prioritized over people. “They didn’t care about us. All they wanted was for the rooms to be filled and customers to be happy—never mind the staff,” one front-desk agent recounted.

### Theme 2: Interpersonal and Social Factors

**Managerial Conflict.** Conflicts with supervisors emerged as a recurring issue. Participants described being shouted at, publicly humiliated, or ignored by their managers. A restaurant server shared, “I was yelled at in front of customers. That was the last straw for me.” Favoritism and inconsistent communication further eroded trust.

**Colleague Relations.** While some participants appreciated team camaraderie, others experienced gossip, exclusion, and lack of cooperation. “It felt like high school. People formed cliques and spread rumors,” one housekeeper reported. Poor interpersonal dynamics created a stressful environment that pushed employees away.

**Discrimination and Bias.** Issues of gender bias, ethnic favoritism, and age-related discrimination were voiced. For example, a female bartender stated, “Men were promoted faster, even if they joined later.” Another participant noted unequal workloads based on ethnicity. These perceptions fostered resentment and a sense of injustice.

**Customer Misconduct.** Harassment by customers, both verbal and physical, was described as a common and often tolerated occurrence. Participants expressed frustration that management rarely intervened. One employee said, “A guest made inappropriate comments and all the manager said was, ‘Don’t make a scene.’” The absence of protective measures left employees feeling vulnerable.

**Social Stigma of Hospitality Jobs.** Several interviewees highlighted that hospitality roles are viewed as low-status or temporary by society. One participant shared, “My parents didn’t understand why I’d work in a hotel after getting a degree. They thought I was wasting my life.” This social pressure added to the internal conflict about staying in the profession.

### Theme 3: Personal and Psychological Factors

**Burnout and Fatigue.** Physical and emotional exhaustion was reported across roles. Long shifts, understaffing, and high-pressure tasks left employees depleted. A participant commented, “By the end of each day, I couldn’t even feel my feet. I went home only to sleep and come back.” Burnout ultimately led to disengagement and resignation.

**Lack of Job Satisfaction.** Employees described their jobs as monotonous, unfulfilling, and devoid of personal meaning. The absence of recognition for effort and achievement deepened their dissatisfaction. “No one said thank you. It was like we were invisible,” one server lamented.

**Personal Life Conflicts.** The demanding nature of the work often clashed with personal responsibilities, such as family care or academic commitments. “I had to miss my child’s school events repeatedly. It started affecting my home life,” explained one participant. Balancing personal priorities with work was often unsustainable.

**Mismatch with Career Goals.** Many viewed their hospitality role as a temporary step rather than a career destination. Participants frequently mentioned that their educational background or career aspirations lay elsewhere. “This was never part of my plan. I just needed a job while applying for government exams,” one receptionist admitted.

**Psychological Distress.** Anxiety, sadness, and hopelessness were commonly reported. Several participants described mental health symptoms that worsened with prolonged exposure to stress. “I started dreading going to work. I was constantly anxious,” said a cashier.

**Loss of Motivation.** As dissatisfaction accumulated, many participants reported a growing sense of apathy. They described feeling emotionally disconnected from their work. “At some point, I just stopped caring. I would do the bare minimum and count down the hours,” said a former hotel bellboy.

**Desire for Better Opportunities.** Finally, many employees left in pursuit of new ventures—be it migration, self-employment, or moving to other industries. “I always wanted to open my own café. I realized I was wasting time being unhappy here,” one participant shared. Aspirations beyond hospitality strongly influenced decisions to quit.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the multifaceted causes of employee turnover in the hospitality industry using a qualitative approach grounded in semi-structured interviews with 24 hospitality workers in Tehran. The findings revealed three overarching categories of contributing factors: organizational, interpersonal and social, and personal and psychological. These themes not only resonate with established research in hospitality management but also illuminate context-specific factors that influence turnover, particularly in developing economies like Iran.

Organizational factors emerged as the most dominant driver of turnover, with participants frequently citing poor leadership, inadequate compensation, lack of development opportunities, job insecurity, and an imbalance between work and personal life. These findings are consistent with earlier studies which identified organizational policies and managerial behavior as critical antecedents to turnover intention (Hom et al., 2017; Yang, Wan, & Fu, 2012). Specifically, ineffective leadership practices such as micromanagement and lack of recognition were reported to erode employee trust and engagement—confirming prior evidence that transformational leadership reduces turnover by enhancing organizational commitment (Amin et al., 2017). Similarly, the prevalence of low and inconsistent pay aligns with research by Karatepe and Uludag (2008), who found that economic insecurity and wage dissatisfaction were primary predictors of employee departure in Turkish hotels. Furthermore, participants emphasized the absence of clear career paths or advancement, echoing the findings of Deery and Jago (2015), who argued that a lack of personal development opportunities undermines retention efforts in service-heavy sectors.

Work-life imbalance was another recurring theme, particularly in the form of long hours, overtime without compensation, and lack of flexible scheduling. This supports Tews, Michel, and Ellingson (2013), who found that rigid work schedules and constant availability demands were associated with employee burnout and attrition in the hospitality industry. The issue of job insecurity also featured prominently in our interviews, with several participants referencing temporary contracts and vague employment terms. This mirrors studies in unstable labor markets where high turnover is linked to a lack of perceived organizational support and insecure work arrangements (Cho et al.,



2006; Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Interestingly, misalignment between employees' personal values and organizational culture—particularly regarding respect and fairness—emerged as a nuanced but critical factor, corroborating the role of organizational justice in shaping employee decisions (Karatepe, 2013).

Interpersonal and social factors also significantly influenced turnover decisions. Many participants spoke of toxic relationships with supervisors and colleagues, including verbal abuse, favoritism, gossip, and isolation. These findings align with Kim et al. (2014), who emphasized that poor workplace relationships reduce psychological safety and increase emotional exhaustion among hospitality employees. Negative social dynamics, particularly in tight-knit, high-pressure environments such as hotels and restaurants, can create alienating experiences that compel individuals to leave (Tews et al., 2013). Furthermore, the issue of discrimination—whether based on gender, ethnicity, or age—was noted by several participants, highlighting the role of workplace inequality as a push factor in employment decisions. This supports the work of Deery and Jago (2015), who noted that perceived discrimination correlates with lower organizational commitment and increased turnover intention.

The influence of customer behavior, particularly in the form of verbal abuse and harassment, also emerged as a powerful factor contributing to psychological distress and eventual turnover. This finding is strongly supported by Kim et al. (2014), who found that guest incivility significantly increases emotional dissonance and burnout in frontline hospitality staff. Moreover, the lack of institutional mechanisms to protect employees from such misconduct reinforces a sense of neglect and betrayal by the employer. Interestingly, the role of societal perception—viewing hospitality jobs as low-status or temporary—was uniquely emphasized in the Iranian context. Several participants referenced family disapproval and social stigma, a theme less explored in Western literature but increasingly recognized in developing economies where vocational hierarchies are rigid (Sharifzadeh, 2018).

Personal and psychological factors were also found to play a substantial role in turnover. Burnout and fatigue were universally described among participants, manifesting in physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and emotional detachment. These findings align closely with the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that employees are motivated to preserve physical and emotional resources and are likely to withdraw from roles that excessively deplete them. Participants also reported low job satisfaction and a lack of intrinsic motivation—conditions shown in previous studies to predict withdrawal behavior (Hom et al., 2017). Moreover, several participants indicated that their jobs were not aligned with their long-term career aspirations, viewing hospitality as a temporary solution rather than a purposeful vocation. This supports Mitchell et al.'s (2001) theory of job embeddedness, which suggests that employees are more likely to leave roles that do not fit their identity or future goals.

Psychological distress, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and hopelessness, was another significant factor driving turnover. Participants noted that prolonged exposure to high-pressure environments without emotional support contributed to their mental health decline—a finding supported by research on emotional labor and its psychological costs in service industries (Karatepe, 2013; Kim et al., 2014). Finally, many participants expressed a strong desire to pursue alternative opportunities—either in other industries, entrepreneurial ventures, or through emigration. This reflects both a lack of perceived upward mobility in the hospitality sector and broader economic disillusionment, consistent with Gholipour et al. (2020), who reported high levels of career dissatisfaction among Iranian service workers.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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