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Abstract: The hotel industry's reliance on a stable labour force is threatened by low career choice intentions among graduates, exacerbated by occupational stigmatisation. This study situates the talent challenges of the hotel industry within China's high versus low climate changing region context, where occupational prestige biases linked to the high low climate change dichotomy compound preexisting stigma, particularly undermining the professional identity of graduates from high climate changing regions – a critical talent pool. Analysis of data from 314 Chinese hotel interns using structural equation modelling revealed that perceived occupational stigma negatively affects both vocational identity and career choice intention. These findings contribute to understanding how future talent perceives and responds to occupational stigma, offering theoretical and practical insights for hospitality education and talent retention, particularly within evolving labour dynamics between high- and low-climate changing regions.

Keywords: occupational stigma; vocational identity; vocational skill; career choice intention; climate changing regions.

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1 Introduction

The survival of the hotel industry highly depends on a traditional, abundant, and stable labour force from the labour market, necessitating the attraction of the next generation hotel talents (Goh and Okumus, 2020). However, in Chinese traditional concepts, the hotel industry is often regarded as a profession with hardship, low social status, and limited income (Lv et al., 2023). Such prejudice severely affects the career choices of hotel and tourism management graduates. Statistics show that only 10%–20% of graduates in China will enter the hotel industry after graduation (Wen et al., 2019). Even worse, the hotel internship experiences of Chinese college students majoring in hotel or tourism management during their school years often further exacerbate their negative impressions of the hotel industry, and many graduates are even less willing to engage in the hotel industry after completing their internships (Wen et al., 2022). This undoubtedly poses a great challenge to the talent reserve and sustainable development of the hotel industry (Yu et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding the causes of this phenomenon and finding ways to reverse this situation have become issues that Chinese hotel education providers must address. Furthermore, this study contextualises the talent challenges facing the hotel industry within the broader framework of high versus low climate changing regions. As a major employer of labour migrating from high climate changing regions to low climate changing regions, the industry is subject to a compounding effect: occupational prestige biases arising from the divide between high and low climate changing regions overlap with its preexisting occupational stigma, which particularly undermines the professional identity of graduates from high climate changing regions – a crucial talent pool. Addressing the perception of stigma is therefore not only relevant for sectoral development but also important for fostering balanced human resource flows between high and low climate changing regions.

Occupational stigma is an important research area in social psychology, focusing on stigmatised jobs that are regarded as not conforming to mainstream social values or subjective standards. These jobs often suffer from prejudice because they are considered dirty, repulsive, and of low social status (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). With the

development of society, almost all occupations have stigmatising factors to varying degrees (Kreiner et al., 2006). The hotel industry is often dominated by negative impressions in the public's career choice perception (Alcalde-González et al., 2021). Manual labour serving the people is usually devalued, has long been affected by the public's negative stereotypes, and is often labelled with negative images such as low skill, low wage, low entry barrier, and potential servile relationships with customers (Moufakkir, 2023). These inherent and even stigmatised industry images lead to low career recognition among practitioners (Kusluvan and Akova, 2022). Therefore, students of hotel management may also reject working in hotels due to occupational stigmatisation.

Internship is an indispensable part of tourism and hotel education, with the core objective of providing students with access to practical knowledge (Robinson et al., 2016). However, previous studies have revealed that the negative experiences of tourism and hotel major students during their internships may have adverse effects on their future career intentions (Koc et al., 2014). Although the human resource shortage issue in the hotel industry has become a focus widely concerned by both the industry and academia (Michael and Fotiadis, 2022), most researches are still limited to exploring the turnover intentions of on the job employees, while the career choice intentions of potential practitioners are insufficiently explored. Previous studies have identified the effects of internship satisfaction, career development prospects, personal interest preferences, working environments, personality traits, and interpersonal relationships on career choice intention (Papathanassis, 2021). However, the influence of perceived occupational stigma on career choice intentions has garnered limited attention. The unique career trajectory of beginning at the entry level within the hotel industry, coupled with interns' typically brief initial working periods and low career embeddedness, may contribute to distinct influence mechanisms and varying outcomes in their perceptions of occupational stigma and subsequent career choice intentions (Peng et al., 2024).

Building on previous research, this research focuses on the group of hotel interns. By combining social identity theory (SIT) and resource conservation theory, it constructs a framework to outline the influence mechanisms and structural relationships among occupational stigma, vocational identity, vocational skill, and hotel interns' career choice intentions. This investigation uncovers the career choice mechanisms of potential hotel industry employees, namely hotel interns, thereby not only broadening the scope of research on occupational stigma and enhancing the theoretical framework of hotel human resource management but also offering management implications for the talent cultivation of college hotel management majors and the retention of excellent talents in the hotel industry.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Social identity theory

SIT was first proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and is an important theory for understanding group relationships and individual behaviours. The core of this theory lies in the concept of self-categorisation, where individuals classify themselves into specific social groups based on various social attributes. This process not only involves an individual's embeddedness within the group but also encompasses the emotional bonds

and self-perception closely related to the group, which are shaped by collective consciousness (Hogg and Terry, 2000). SIT points out that an individual's self-worth and identity are deeply rooted in their membership of social groups (Gu and Bari, 2025). This theoretical framework provides an important perspective for exploring the cognitive processes underlying group behaviours, covering in depth analyses from the individual to the group level (Burford, 2012). Specifically, individuals in social groups form preferences for in groups and tendencies to derogate out groups through social comparison and categorisation mechanisms, as a strategy to enhance and consolidate their social status. This process is often accompanied by positive evaluations of the in group and negative attitudes towards the out group. Such preferential comparisons may exacerbate social conflicts, tensions, stereotypes, prejudices, and even discrimination (Gu and Bari, 2025). Integrating sociological and psychological perspectives, SIT provides robust theoretical support for elucidating individuals' cognitive processes, evaluations, and occupational choices.

2.2 Conservation of resources theory

Conservation of resource theory (CRT) is a branch of stress theory and can better explain and reveal individual behaviours under stress (Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend, 1978). Hobfoll (1989) defined resources as things or accesses that individuals consider valuable, including material, conditional, personal, and energy resources. The premise of this theory is that individuals strive to acquire, retain, cultivate, and protect what they cherish. Therefore, people will try to maintain existing resources and increase valuable resources (Hobfoll, 2011). Stress mainly stems from the threat of resource loss, actual resource loss, or failure to obtain expected returns after substantial resource investment (Hobfoll, 2002). Facing the pressure of resource loss, individuals can adopt two main coping strategies to offset losses and stop losses in a timely manner: one is resource conservation, that is, suspending resource consumption to protect existing resources; the other is resource investment, actively investing to obtain beneficial resources, aiming to offset resource losses and enhance the ability to cope with challenges (Zhou et al., 2023). CRT explains the psychological motives of individuals in preserving, acquiring, and utilising resources from the perspective of resource gains and losses, and can better predict and explain self-resource evaluations, stress burdens, and behavioural decisions of stigmatised practitioners under limited resources (Bentein et al., 2017). CRT furnishes a potent theoretical framework for comprehending and anticipating self-resource assessments, stress perceptions, and behavioural decisions among stigmatised practitioners in resource-constrained environments.

2.3 Perceived occupational stigma

Occupational stigma originates from the concept of 'dirty work' introduced by American sociologist Hughes (Hughes, 1962). Goffman (1963) characterised stigmatisation as societal labelling that demeans and stigmatises individuals or groups, categorising it into three primary types: physical impairments, personality defects, and indicators associated with race, ethnicity, and religion. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) posited that occupational stigma elicits disdain and aversion due to its violation of societal norms for 'normal or clean' work, leading the public to affix negative labels, socially isolate practitioners, and

foster prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. Previous research has converged on a consensus, defining occupational stigma as the degradation and discrimination against a job within a specific social context, causing practitioners to perceive their occupation as unclean or shameful (Kusluvan and Akova, 2022).

Previous studies have shown that occupational stigma has extremely negative impacts on practitioners and even the entire industry, such as reducing vocational identity (Schaubroeck et al., 2018), weakening work enthusiasm (Patterson et al., 2019), decreasing work performance (Devers and Mishina, 2019), increasing anxiety (Baur et al., 2018), raising turnover rates (Helms et al., 2019), making it increasingly difficult to attract and retain excellent talents (Shantz and Booth, 2014), and ultimately making the entire industry lose its attractiveness for development (Hampel and Tracey, 2017). Current research on occupational stigma predominantly examines the vocational identity, withdrawal behaviours, and turnover intentions of incumbent employees, with insufficient exploration into the relationship between occupational stigma and career-choice intentions among potential practitioners (Lv et al., 2024). Given the prevalent issue of low post-internship employment intentions and significant talent loss among hotel management students, an in-depth investigation of this demographic is particularly crucial. This effect is more pronounced among interns from high climate changing regions, who are exposed to dual pressures of occupational stigma and regional occupational prestige bias.

2.4 Career choice intention

Career choice is a complex decision-making process involving multiple cognitive activities and behavioural responses (Jepsen, 1974). It requires individuals to assess their self-cognition, analyse career information, evaluate career environments and prospects, and ultimately make choices that align with their personal needs and societal expectations. Career choice intention reflects an individual's inclination and attitude towards a specific occupation, serving as a pivotal precursor to predict actual career choice behaviour (Farmaki, 2018). Prior research has demonstrated that individual factors, as well as family environment, school education, and socioeconomic background, influence career choice intention (Sharif et al., 2019). For hotel management students, economic factors and practical factors are primary considerations (Kim et al., 2010). However, despite these systematic identifications of key factors, insufficient attention has been devoted to the negative aspects of the hotel working environment and their psychological impacts on career choice mechanisms. Career choice intention may further differ between interns from high and low climate changing regions due to varying social perceptions and employment environments.

2.5 Vocational identity

Vocational identity is rooted in the 'self-identity' theory advanced by Erikson (1994). It entails an individual's positive appraisal, enduring attitude toward their professional role, and societal role positioning (Moore and Hofman, 1988). Despite variations in definition, vocational identity is widely recognised as a beneficial factor, particularly in professions such as teaching and nursing (Liao et al., 2024). It encapsulates an individual's understanding of career goals and values, reflecting the occupation's central role in their self-concept and its alignment with personal values (Kielhofner, 2002). In the hotel

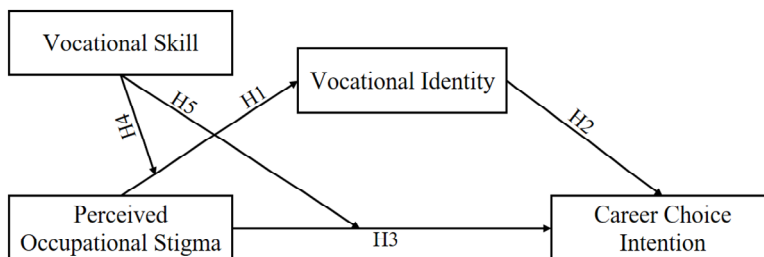
industry, vocational identity manifests as affection for the sector, recognition of its value, and positive attitudes toward hotel work (Wang et al., 2020). Prior research has demonstrated that occupational stigma prompts employees to focus on the social symbolic significance of their profession, leading to compromised vocational identity, which subsequently influences job satisfaction, loyalty, and performance (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). While the impacts of occupational stigma on employees' work status and behavioural tendencies are well-documented, the interrelationships among occupational stigma, vocational identity, and career choice intentions have received limited attention. Vocational identity is likely to be weakened more significantly among interns from high climate changing regions under the joint influence of stigma and regional bias.

3 Research model and hypotheses

3.1 Research model

This study establishes a moderated mediation model to examine the complex interplay among perceived occupational stigma, vocational identity, vocational skill, and career choice intentions among hotel interns from high and low climate changing regions. The primary focus is to investigate the mediating role of vocational identity, and assess the moderating influence of vocational skill. Both roles are analysed within the context of the relationship between perceived occupational stigma and hotel interns' career choice intentions. The objective is to clarify the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which perceived occupational stigma influences career choice intentions, thereby providing theoretical insights and empirical support for reducing stigma and enhancing career intentions among hotel interns. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework.

Figure 1 Research model



3.2 Research hypotheses

Drawing upon SIT, stigmatised practitioners, upon recognising societal perceptions of their occupations, often endeavour to modify their identities to mitigate discrimination (Major and O'Brien, 2005). Occupational stigma can result in external devaluation and discrimination, subsequently diminishing practitioners' vocational identity (Kreiner and Murphy, 2016). Prior research has established that perceived occupational stigma exerts considerable influence on practitioners' self-worth, work-related stress, and withdrawal tendencies (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). This negative impact on identity can lead to

emotional exhaustion and a decline in core self-evaluations (Zhou et al., 2023). Peng et al. (2024) observed that effective career adaptation can alleviate interns' perceptions of occupational stigma and bolster their vocational identity. Thus, hypothesis H1 was proposed.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) Perceived occupational stigma has a significant negative impact on vocational identity.

Previous research has indicated that prolonged feelings of job inferiority can lead employees to dis-identify with their occupations and withdraw from their work identities (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). Lai et al. (2013) further elaborated that dis-identification with both one's occupation and organisation is positively associated with turnover intentions. Conversely, when employees possess a profound sense of organisational identification, they are inclined to exhibit cooperative behaviours, which not only elevate their motivation to meet organisational needs but also markedly decrease turnover propensity (Li et al., 2015). In the context of hotel interns, those with high levels of vocational identity are more likely to hold favourable views toward hotel careers, thereby exhibiting stronger intentions to pursue related careers. Thus, hypothesis H2 was proposed.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) Vocational identities has a significant positive impact on career choice intention.

Drawing upon conservation of resources theory, the identity threats and self-esteem losses induced by occupational stigma constitute potential or realised resource depletion, prompting individuals to engage in resource-protective behaviours, including avoidance strategies (Hobfoll, 1989). Empirical evidence suggests that practitioners experiencing the adverse emotional states and work pressures associated with stigmatised occupations exhibit heightened job burnout, diminished work performance, and elevated turnover intentions (Pinel and Paulin, 2005). Wildes (2005) observed that restaurant servers who perceived stigma due to their occupation tended to exit the industry and were reluctant to recommend restaurant jobs to their friends or family. These findings collectively indicate that occupational stigma exerts a deleterious influence on practitioners' attitudes and behaviours towards their careers. Therefore, hypothesis H3 was proposed.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) Perceived occupational stigma has a significant negative impact on career choice intention.

Vocational skill, grounded in vocational abilities categorised as 'knowing why', 'knowing whom', and 'knowing how', are pivotal for career success (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). These abilities, which encompass career motivation, personal meaning, identity, networks, contact methods, skills, and work-related knowledge, serve as important resources for employees and foster positive career perceptions and goal attainment (Hobfoll and Freedy, 2017). According to CRT, individuals strive to minimise resource losses when confronted with potential or actual depletion. They mobilise both environmental and internal resources to cope with such situations, offsets, and prevent further depletion (Hobfoll, 2011). The core of vocational skill lies in the development of work-related skills and the seizing of career opportunities, emphasising a flexible skill

base and continuous learning for advancement (Eby et al., 2003). Thus, hypothesis H4 was proposed.

Hypothesis 4 (H4) Vocational skill moderates the relationship between perceived occupational stigma and career choice intention.

Previous research has demonstrated a positive correlation between vocational skill, vocational identity, and perceptions of career success (Xing et al., 2023). In the hotel industry, the mastery of career-related skills significantly enhances employees' job satisfaction and vocational identity, stimulating work motivation and improving efficiency (Kong, 2013). Individuals possessing diverse work-related skills engage in continuous learning, enhancing career satisfaction and optimising work performance (Sultana and Malik, 2019). Additionally, vocational skill among hotel interns negatively moderates the relationship between perceived occupational stigma and job burnout, indirectly influencing turnover intentions (Xing et al., 2023). CRT's core assumption is that individuals actively acquire, retain, enhance, and protect valued resources (Hobfoll, 2002). Therefore, hypothesis H5 was proposed.

Hypothesis 5 (H5) Vocational skill moderates the relationship between perceived occupational stigma and vocational identity.

4 Verification of hypotheses

4.1 Questionnaire design

The scales utilised in this questionnaire are adapted from existing, validated instruments with modifications tailored to suit our research context. Specifically, the indicators for occupational stigma are derived from Pinel and Paulin (2005); those for vocational identity are sourced from Meyer et al. (1993); items pertaining to career choice intention are based on Greenbank and Hepworth (2008); and the measures for vocational skills are informed by Eby et al. (2003). For the purpose of measurement, participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The comprehensive list of items is provided in Appendix A.

4.2 Data collection and sample statistics

The survey questionnaires were administered to undergraduate students in tourism programs with hotel internship experience between March and April 2024. Data collection was facilitated through two primary channels. Initially, 152 responses were obtained using the convenience sampling method via online social media platforms. Subsequently, a representative sampling approach targeted students majoring in hotel management and tourism management, yielding a total of 328 questionnaires. After rigorous screening to exclude incomplete and anomalous responses, 314 valid responses were retained for analysis.

Demographic information for the final respondents is summarised in Table 1. The sample was predominantly female (73.6%). Among the respondents, 41.4% were interns from tourism management programs, and 48.1% were from hotel management programs.

Regarding the type of internship hotels, 46.5% were from international chain hotels, and 42.4% were from domestic chain brand hotels. The majority of participants (43.9%) had internships lasting 1–3 months, followed by 33.4% with internships lasting 3–6 months. Respondents from high climate changing regions (HCRs, $n = 168$) were primarily from Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Heilongjiang provinces. Respondents from low climate changing regions (LCRs, $n = 146$) were primarily from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Shanghai municipalities.

Table 1 Demographic distribution

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Gender	Male	83	26.4
	Female	231	73.6
Major	Tourism management	130	41.4
	Hotel management	151	48.1
	Others	33	10.5
Internship hotel type	International chain hotel	146	46.5
	Domestic chains hotel	133	42.4
	Others	34	10.8
Internship time	Less than 3 months	138	43.9
	3 months to less than 6 months	105	33.4
	6 months or above	71	22.7
Regional background	High climate changing region	168	53.5
	Low climate changing region	146	46.5

4.3 Reliability and validity

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed using SPSS 26.0 to assess internal consistency, yielding values between 0.807 and 0.892, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal component analysis and varimax rotation identified underlying factors and variables. Suitability for factor analysis was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test (value = 0.865) and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 26.0 evaluated a three-dimensional model of vocational identity, demonstrating excellent fit with goodness-of-fit indices: CMIN/DF = 1.451, RMSEA = 0.038, NFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.994, and TLI = 0.99. Table 2 presents the composite reliability (CR) values for each factor and variable, ranging from 0.831 to 0.918, all surpassing the threshold of 0.70. The average variance extracted (AVE) values, spanning from 0.572 to 0.710, all exceeded the benchmark of 0.5, indicating satisfactory convergent validity of the scale. Table 3 demonstrates the discriminant validity of the scale, with the square root values of the AVE for each factor exceeding the correlation coefficients among the factors and other variables. This finding supports a relatively high level of discriminant validity in accordance with the criteria established by Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Table 2 Factor loading, validity, and reliability¹

Construct		Item	Factor loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Perceived occupational stigma		POS1	0.754	0.880	0.891	0.577
		POS2	0.762			
		POS3	0.744			
		POS4	0.756			
		POS5	0.756			
		POS6	0.786			
Vocational identity	Cognitive identity	VCI1	0.825	0.807	0.830	0.709
		VCI2	0.859			
	Emotional identity	VEI1	0.824	0.833	0.853	0.660
		VEI2	0.874			
		VEI3	0.732			
	Social identity	VSI1	0.842	0.875	0.88	0.710
		VSI2	0.835			
		VSI3	0.850			
	Vocational skill		VS1	0.760	0.874	0.933
VS2			0.764			
VS3			0.770			
VS4			0.797			
VS5			0.768			
Career choice intention		CCI1	0.731	0.892	0.875	0.699
		CCI2	0.764			
		CCI3	0.779			

Notes: ¹AVE = average variance extracted; CR = construct reliability.

Table 3 Correlation matrix and discriminant assessment^{1,2}

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>POS</i>	<i>VCI</i>	<i>VEI</i>	<i>VSI</i>	<i>CCI</i>	<i>VS</i>
POS	5.11	1.22	<i>0.760</i>					
VCI	5.06	0.98	-0.350**	<i>0.842</i>				
VEI	4.74	1.06	-0.344**	0.405**	<i>0.812</i>			
VSI	4.63	1.24	-0.343**	0.404**	0.490**	<i>0.843</i>		
CCI	4.49	1.19	-0.492**	0.347**	0.275**	0.234**	<i>0.836</i>	
VS	5.02	1.06	-0.034*	0.036	0.006	0.041*	0.031**	<i>0.859</i>

Notes: ¹The diagonal element, which shows the square root of AVE on each construct, is in italic font.

²POS = perceived occupational stigma; VCI = cognitive identity;

VEI = emotional identity; VSI = social identity; CCI = career choice intention;

VS = vocational skill.

4.4 Mediating effect of vocational identity

To examine the interrelationships among perceived occupational stigma, vocational identity, and career choice intention, while verifying the mediating effect of vocational identity, this study employed the path analysis function of AMOS 26.0 software, utilising the maximum likelihood estimation method for parameter estimation and structural equation modelling. The results indicated that the model fit indices were acceptable, with CMIN/DF = 1.719, RMSEA = 0.048, NFI = 0.934, CFI = 0.971, and TLI = 0.965, suggesting a robust internal structure for the research model. As detailed in Table 4, the findings revealed that perceived occupational stigma exhibited a significant negative effect on vocational identity (path coefficient = -0.561 , $p < 0.001$), while vocational identity positively influenced the career choice intention of hotel interns (path coefficient = 0.232 , $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, perceived occupational stigma had a significant negative impact on the career choice intention of hotel interns (path coefficient = -0.437 , $p < 0.001$). These results supported Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

Table 4 Result of path verification¹

<i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>Path</i>	<i>Path coefficient</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Result</i>
H1	Perceived occupational stigma → vocational identity	-0.561	***	Supported
H2	Vocational identity → career choice intention	0.232	0.005	Supported
H3	Perceived occupational stigma → career choice intention	-0.437	***	Supported
	Vocational identity → cognitive identity	0.705		-
	Vocational identity → emotional identity	0.709	***	-
	Vocational identity → social identity	0.719	***	-

Notes: ¹*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

For the mediation analysis, the bootstrap test method was utilised, following the procedure outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2008). As shown in Table 5, the total effect value was -0.495 , with the 95% confidence interval (CI) excluding zero, indicating a statistically significant total effect. For the indirect effect, the impact of perceived occupational stigma on career choice intention, mediated by vocational identity, also displayed a significant effect, as the 95% CI did not contain zero. This finding confirms the mediating role of vocational identity between perceived occupational stigma and career choice intention.

Table 5 Result of meditating effects

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E</i>	<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Total effect	-0.495	0.054	-0.608	-0.393	0.000
Direct effect	-0.381	0.075	-0.551	-0.254	0.000
Indirect effect	-0.114	0.045	-0.198	-0.019	0.021

4.5 Moderating effect of vocational skill

The moderated mediation model was tested using Model-8 in the SPSS macro compiled by Hayes (2015). The results in Table 6 indicated that after incorporating vocational skills into the model, the product term of perceived occupational stigma and vocational skills had significant predictive impacts on vocational identity and career choice intention regarding relevant occupations (for vocational identity: $B = 0.202$, $t = 3.743$, $p < 0.001$; for career choice intention: $B = 0.118$, $t = 2.224$, $p < 0.05$). This shows that vocational skills not only moderate the direct predictive effect of perceived occupational stigma on hotel interns' career choice intention regarding relevant occupations but also can moderate the predictive effect of perceived occupational stigma on hotel interns' vocational identity.

Table 6 Result of moderated mediation^{1,2}

Regression equation ($N = 314$)		Fitting indicators			Coefficient significance	
Outcome variable	Predictive variable	R	R^2	$F (df)$	B	t
VI		0.478	0.228	11.29***(8)		
	POS				-0.372	-6.986***
	VS				0.018	0.347*
	POS $\times$ VS				0.202	3.743***
CCI		0.539	0.29	13.818***(9)		
	VI				0.127	2.301*
	POS				-0.403	-7.304***
	VS				0.063	1.274*
	POS $\times$ VS				0.118	2.224*

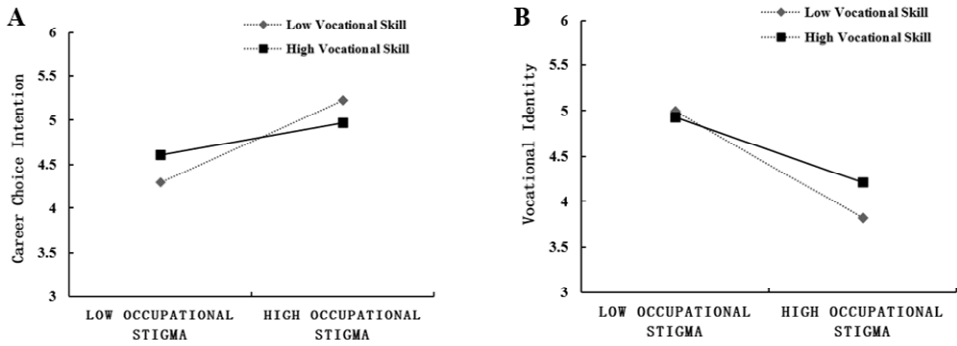
Notes: 1*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

²POS = perceived occupational stigma; VC = vocational identity; CCI = career choice intention; VS = vocational skill.

Among individuals with lower vocational skill levels, perceived occupational stigma exhibits a significant negative predictive effect on their career choice intention toward relevant occupations (simple slope = -0.483 , $t = -8.096$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, individuals with higher vocational skill levels demonstrate a weaker negative predictive effect (simple slope = -0.294 , $t = -4.02$, $p < 0.001$). As illustrated in Figure 2(a), perceived occupational stigma has a notable negative impact on hotel interns' career choice intention toward relevant occupations, yet this impact diminishes as vocational skill levels increase. Consequently, Hypothesis H4 is supported.

Similarly, for individuals with lower vocational skill levels, perceived occupational stigma significantly negatively predicts vocational identity (simple slope = -0.381 , $t = -9.412$, $p < 0.001$). Among those with higher vocational skill levels, although perceived occupational stigma still exhibits a negative predictive effect on vocational identity, its predictive strength is attenuated (simple slope = -0.151 , $t = -2.711$, $p < 0.01$). As shown in Figure 2(b), as vocational skill levels rise, the negative predictive impact of perceived occupational stigma on vocational identity gradually decreases. Thus, Hypothesis H5 is also supported.

Figure 2 The moderating effect of vocational skill



4.6 Multi-group analysis by regional background

To examine whether the relationships differ across regional backgrounds, the sample was split into HCRs ($n = 168$) and LCRs ($n = 146$). Separate path analyses were conducted for each group, and the results are summarised in Table 7. Although the negative effects are significant in both groups, the coefficients are consistently larger (more negative) for the HCR group, suggesting that interns from high climate changing regions may be more vulnerable to occupational stigma.

Table 7 Path coefficients by regional background¹

Path	HCRs ($n = 168$) β	LCRs ($n = 146$) β
Perceived occupational stigma $\rightarrow$ vocational identity	-0.612***	-0.498***
Vocational identity $\rightarrow$ career choice intention	0.208**	0.267**
Perceived occupational stigma $\rightarrow$ career choice intention	-0.472**	-0.389***

Notes: ¹*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary of findings

Four key findings emerge from this study. Firstly, perceived occupational stigma negatively impacts vocational identity among hotel interns, aligning with prior research that highlights the detrimental effects of stigma on practitioners' self-worth and work-related aspects (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). This stigma, reflected in negative societal views, leads interns to have a lower sense of identification with their chosen profession; consistent with the notion that stigma can cause external depreciation and discrimination, thereby reducing professional identity (Kreiner and Murphy, 2016). Our results further affirm this negative association and underscore its significance within the hotel intern context, complementing findings by Peng et al. (2024) that favourable career adaptation can mitigate stigma perception and enhance professional identity.

Secondly, vocational identity positively influences career choice intention among hotel interns, echoing previous research linking employees' professional identity to their

workplace behaviours (Li et al., 2015). High vocational identity fosters a positive view of the hotel profession, thereby increasing interns' intention to pursue a career in the industry. This validates the importance of professional identity in shaping career decisions within the hotel context.

Thirdly, perceived occupational stigma significantly negatively affects career choice intention among hotel interns, similar to prior studies showing negative behaviours such as job burnout, low performance, and high turnover intention among practitioners experiencing stigma-related negative emotions and work pressure (Lai et al., 2013). Interns sensing stigma attached to hotel work are more likely to avoid the industry and have lower career choice intentions, aligning with the broader trend observed in studies on stigma's effects on career-related aspects.

Fourthly, vocational skills play a significant moderating role in these relationships. Consistent with research emphasising the importance of skills in promoting positive career cognition and goal achievement (Hobfoll and Freedy, 2017), and studies showing positive correlations between skills and professional identity and career success perception (Xing et al., 2023), our study finds that for interns with lower skills, the negative predictive effect of stigma on career choice intention and vocational identity is strong. However, as skills increase, this negative effect gradually weakens, indicating that skills serve as a buffer or resource helping interns cope with stigma's negative impact. This finding enriches our understanding of how different factors interact in shaping career choices within the hotel industry.

Fifth, the multi-group analysis by regional background revealed that the negative effects of perceived occupational stigma on vocational identity and career choice intention are consistently more negative for interns from high climate changing regions compared to those from low climate changing regions.

5.2 Theoretical implication

This study offers substantial theoretical contributions in three distinct domains. Firstly, it expands the scope of occupational stigma research within the hotel industry by focusing on hotel interns, a group previously underrepresented in this area of study. By directing attention to this neglected cohort, the research broadens the purview of occupational stigma studies and provides insights into how this phenomenon evolves across different career stages. This not only augments the diversity of research subjects but also furnishes novel empirical data and theoretical viewpoints that enrich the occupational stigma framework.

Secondly, the integration of SIT facilitates a more nuanced examination of the interplay between occupational stigma and career choices. By delineating an influence pathway encompassing perceived occupational stigma, vocational identity, and career choice intention among hotel interns, this study elucidates the underlying mechanisms. Specifically, it clarifies the mediating function of vocational identity, thereby enhancing our comprehension of how occupational stigma influences career decisions and unravelling the complexity of this process.

Thirdly, the application of conservation of resources theory underscores the pivotal role of vocational skills as a personal resource in mitigating the adverse effects of occupational stigma. This study demonstrates how vocational skills can mould vocational identity and foster favourable career choices, offering a novel lens through which to

comprehend the intricate influence dynamics of occupational stigma. This finding underscores the significance of vocational skills in assisting individuals in navigating occupational challenges and preserving their self-worth.

Lastly, by incorporating the high-versus-low climate changing region dichotomy as a grouping variable, this study extends the application of conservation of resources theory to a regional development context. The multi-group analysis suggests that interns from high climate changing regions experience greater resource depletion when confronting occupational stigma compared to their counterparts from low climate changing regions. This finding underscores the importance of considering regional background as a contextual factor that may amplify or buffer the effects of occupational stigma, thereby enriching the theoretical framework of hotel human resource management with a regional development perspective.

5.3 Practical implication

The hotel industry should collaborate with industry associations and media outlets to showcase professionalism and service spirit among hotel employees. Showcasing professionalism helps interns internalise a positive occupational image, thereby strengthening their vocational identity. Highlighting positive aspects may help reduce stereotypes and biases, which is associated with lower perceived occupational stigma among interns.

A well-structured vocational skills training system is recommended. Practical opportunities and innovation platforms enable interns to apply knowledge and develop skills. Collaboration with industry associations or certification bodies for vocational skills certification may enhance interns' perceived professional legitimacy. Ensuring equal treatment and respect for interns, comparable to regular employees, is associated with higher vocational identity, which in turn is associated with stronger career choice intention.

Educational institutions offering hotel management and tourism programs should develop practical and forward-looking curricula. Incorporating real-world examples and industry trends helps students understand the value and potential of hotel careers. Strengthening vocational concept education and providing objective industry information may reduce the influence of occupational biases. Career counselling services and internships provide students with hands-on experience and industry exposure.

Given that interns from high climate changing regions exhibit stronger negative associations between perceived stigma and career outcomes, targeted support programs should be developed for this subgroup. These may include mentorship initiatives addressing region-specific challenges, scholarship programs reducing financial pressure, and targeted recruitment partnerships with vocational schools in these regions. Such collaborations also support rural revitalisation and regional balanced development goals.

5.4 Limitations and directions for future research

This study still has several limitations. Firstly, with only 314 valid questionnaires, the sample size is relatively limited. In empirical research, a larger sample size is needed for more accurate and reliable results. Future research should expand the sample. Secondly, the research variables focused on perceived occupational stigma, three dimensions of vocational identity, and career choice intention, not fully revealing the complexity. Future

studies could introduce variables like work atmosphere, organisational support, and self-efficacy. Thirdly, due to sample size limitations, this study couldn't analyse control variables like gender, region, and school level.

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Declarations

No conflict of interest exists in the submission of this manuscript, and the manuscript is approved by all authors for publication.

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Appendix A

List of model constructs and items

Perceived occupational stigma is derived from Pinel and Paulin (2005).

- POS1 Many individuals hold negative perceptions of hotel work
- POS2 People judge us based on hotel job stereotypes, not our actual work.
- POS3 Being a hotel intern influences others' interactions with me.
- POS4 Others perceive my behaviour through the lens of my hotel intern identity.
- POS5 Most find it hard to treat our profession equally with others.
- POS6 Hotel work stereotypes deeply impact me.

Vocational identity is derived from Meyer et al. (1993).

- VCI1 I believe hotel work utilises my personal abilities and strengths.
- VCI2 I view the hotel industry's prospects as favourable and plan to continue working in it.
- VEI1 I enjoy working in the hotel industry; it is my interest.
- VEI2 I am fond of the hotel industry and aim to pursue a career in it.
- VEI3 I maintain peak performance, prioritising guest satisfaction.
- VSI1 I am proud to introduce my hotel job to friends, despite it being service work.
- VSI2 I am satisfied with society's evaluation of hotel workers and consider myself part of a respected group.
- VSI3 I care about society's perception of the hotel service workforce.

Vocational skill is derived from Eby et al. (2003).

- VS1 I seek opportunities for continuous learning during my hotel internship.
- VS2 I possess a diverse range of job-related skills.
- VS3 I stay updated with career development trends.
- VS4 I actively seek training and development opportunities.
- VS5 I regularly update my job-related skills.

Career choice intention is derived from Greenbank and Hepworth (2008).

- CCI1 I am interested in hotel industry work/careers.
- CCI2 Most importantly, I enjoy hotel industry work/careers.
- CCI3 I am satisfied with hotel industry work/careers.