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Career growth opportunities, thriving at work and career outcomes: Can COVID-19 anxiety make a difference?

Meng-Long Huo

UniSA Business, University of South Australia, Elton Mayo Building 5000, Adelaide, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Based on a two-wave survey of 242 frontline employees from a restaurant company, this study examines, in the COVID-19 setting, how career growth opportunities affect employee career-related outcomes and how these effects may be moderated. It was found that career growth opportunities improved career commitment and reduced career regret via its boosting effect on employee thriving at work. The survey results also showed that the impact of career growth opportunities on thriving (directly), and on career commitment and career regret (indirectly), is heightened by employee anxiety triggered by COVID-19. This indicates that career growth opportunities are most needed and most beneficial for shaping employees' career outcomes when they experience high levels of COVID-19 anxiety.

1. Introduction

Jobs in the hospitality industry have historically been characterized by low wages, precarious employment contracts and poor working conditions (Baum, Mooney, Robinson, & Solnet, 2020). The quality of hospitality jobs is likely to have been further worsened by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has invoked intense anxiety, defined as feelings of fear and apprehension about COVID-19 (Trougakos, Chawla, & McCarthy, 2020), among employees due to its adverse effects on their lives and livelihoods (Hu, He, & Zhou, 2020). As a health crisis, the pandemic has killed hundreds of thousands of people and thus served as a mortality cue that triggers employee anxiety (Hu et al., 2020). This is especially true for hospitality workers who experience the highest risk of COVID-19 exposure (Pouliakas & Branka, 2020) because their jobs have low potential for work-from-home and requires high face-to-face contact at work (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020). As an economic crisis, the COVID-19 disease has negatively changed the work organization and career experiences of various occupational groups (Prouska, Ayudhya, Beaugrand, Psychogios, & Nyfoudi, 2020). In particular, employees from the hospitality sector are threatened by job losses, work reduction, pay cut and uncertainty about future careers owing to the decreased customer demands for their products and services (Hao, Xiao, & Chon, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020; Pak et al., 2020). Employment insecurity, income losses and unpredictability about future careers as a result of COVID-19 further exacerbate employee perceptions of anxiety (Blustein & Guarino, 2020).

Such adverse impacts of COVID-19 not only make the hospitality industry less attractive as a career field to new entrants (Filimonau, Derqui, & Matute, 2020), but also prompts existing employees to reconsider their career options (Hite & McDonald, 2020). However, hospitality is recovering in various parts of the world and is likely to recover more generally (Breier et al., 2021). It is important not to take a short-term view of the industry and employers need to think about how to retain employees in the hospitality sector and improve their career attitudes toward hospitality. The inseparability of hospitality services from its providers implies that employees' work-related attitudes are key determinants of quality customer service and customer satisfaction (George, Omuudu, & Francis, 2020). If employees are regretful about their current career decision or are not committed to working for the hospitality sector anymore, it will likely hinder the revival of hospitality organizations during and post the COVID-19 pandemic.

This situation highlights a crucial need to identify relevant job resources that help employees improve their work experiences and career attitudes in the COVID-19 environment. The current study, drawing on two-wave survey data from the Chinese restaurant industry, investigates whether career growth opportunities act as a job resource that promotes employee sense of thriving and how such opportunities subsequently affect career outcomes (i.e., career commitment and career regret). Moreover, it tests whether their effects on fostering thriving, enhancing career commitment and reducing career regret are moderated by employee feelings of COVID-19 anxiety. Career growth opportunities refer to the utility of the current job for achieving valuable career outcomes (Bedelian, Kemery, & Pizzolatto, 1991). They are the focus of the
study due to their positive effects on important organizational outcomes, such as workforce performance (Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, & Bravo, 2011), organizational commitment (Weng, McElroy, Morrow, & Liu, 2010) and intention to stay (Weng & McElroy, 2012). In addition, career growth opportunities are conducive to individuals’ employability security (Chay & Aryee, 1999). This is important to employees especially during the COVID-19 crisis, which has destroyed their illusion of employment security and exposed them to a high risk of job losses (Blustein & Guarino, 2020). The current study examines career commitment and career regret as the outcomes of interest for two reasons. From the employee perspective, such career-related psychological states are key determinants of sustainable career development (Jiang, Jiang, & Nielsen, 2021). From the employer perspective, retaining employees’ positive (i.e., career commitment) and reducing negative (i.e., career regret) attitudes toward their careers is crucial for the recovery and prosperity of hospitality businesses during and post pandemic because of their links to important employee outcomes such as turnover intention (Kim, Kang, Lee, & McLean, 2016) and organizational citizenship behavior (Cohen, 2005). COVID-19 anxiety is predicted to be a moderator in the present study. This is supported by Akkermans, Richardson, and Kraimer (2020) who argued that COVID-19-triggered variables are contextual factors that interact with individual factors (e.g., job resources) in affecting employee work and career outcomes. The prevalence and novelty of COVID-19 and the associated high transmission and fatality rates have prompted intense COVID-19 anxiety among people worldwide (Salari et al., 2020). However, there is very little understanding of the impact of such anxiety on employee work-related outcomes (Trougakos et al., 2020).

To uncover new knowledge in this field, the current study tests a model (Fig. 1) that identifies COVID-19 anxiety as a moderator that interplays with job resources (i.e., career growth opportunities) in affecting employee work- and career-related outcomes. The model is theoretically underpinned by the socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). According to the model, job resources foster thriving at work (i.e., a psychological state in which employees experience vitality and learning at work; Spreitzer et al., 2005), which in turn promotes positive career outcomes (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012). In line with this conceptualization, the current research predicts that career growth opportunities are important job resources that enhance employee thriving, which subsequently determines career attitudes. In addition, such effects of career growth opportunities would be heightened by employee anxiety induced by COVID-19. This is underpinned by job demands-resources theory (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which contends that job resources are particularly relevant and beneficial in stressful situations where they are most needed.

The theoretical contribution of the study is four-fold. First, it locates a thriving-based mediation process linking career growth opportunities to increased career commitment and reduced career regret. This contributes to the scarce literature on the explanatory mechanisms between career growth opportunities and career outcomes (Son & Kim, 2019).

Second, the identification of the moderating role of COVID-19 anxiety in the above-mentioned mediation process addresses the dearth of research on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on employees’ work experiences and career outcomes (Prousa et al., 2020). This knowledge is important to help employees adapt to the COVID-19-triggered changes at work (Hu et al., 2020). Third, this work enriches the socially embedded model of thriving by identifying a previously unexamined antecedent of thriving (i.e., career growth opportunities) and the moderation effect of job constraints (i.e., COVID-19 anxiety). The original model (Spreitzer et al., 2005) is exclusively focused on the main effects of job resources and constraints on thriving without recognizing their interaction effects. Fourth, by verifying the moderating role of COVID-19 anxiety in the relationships of career growth opportunities with thriving and career attitudes, this research is among the first to empirically support Akkermans et al.’s (2020) interactionist perspective that COVID-19-related factors interact with job resources in affecting employee career outcomes.

2. Theory and hypothesis development

2.1. Career growth opportunities, thriving at work, and career outcomes

Drawing on the socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), the current study first conceptualizes the impact of career growth opportunities on thriving and then theorizes the association between thriving and career psychological states (i.e., career commitment), followed by a description of the mediation effect of thriving. This leads to an explanation of the moderating role of COVID-19 anxiety, supported by JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Career growth opportunities involve three dimensions, including fulfilling one’s career goals, developing professional skills and abilities, and receiving rewards commensurate with those skills and abilities (Weng & McElroy, 2012). Researchers believe that employee work-related behaviors and decisions are motivated by their desire to attain career objectives (Kraimer et al., 2011; London, 1983). In line with this argument, career growth opportunities have been widely accepted as important job resources that foster positive organizational outcomes such as increased organizational commitment and reduced turnover intention (e.g., Weng et al., 2010; Weng & McElroy, 2012).

The socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005) provides the logic for the relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving at work. According to the model (Spreitzer et al., 2005), job resources from four broad categories (i.e., knowledge, positive meaning, positive affect and relational resources) prompt agentic work behaviors such as task focus and exploration, which in turn promote employee thriving at work—the combined experiences of vitality (feelings of being energetic and alive) and learning (perceptions of continuous development and application of knowledge and skills at work). Based on this conceptualization, the current study argues that career growth opportunities contribute to knowledge and positive

![Fig. 1. Hypothesized conceptual framework: Effects of career growth opportunities on employee work- and career-related outcomes.](image-url)
meaning resources, which keep employees focused on their work tasks, ultimately leading to thriving experiences. Specifically, career growth opportunities enable employees to make progress towards their career goals and develop professional skills (Weng & McElroy, 2012). As a result, employees are likely to perceive their work tasks as meaningful and acquire more professional knowledge. The increased knowledge and positive meaning resources prompt employees to prioritize these work tasks and therefore stay focused on them (Spreitzer et al., 2005). In turn, when employees focus closely on the task at hand, they tend to become absorbed in it and feel energetic (the vitality component of thriving). Moreover, they are inclined to develop and improve routines for doing their tasks efficiently, thereby contributing to learning—the other component of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Despite the dearth of direct research evidence, the thriving-enhancing effect of career growth opportunities is supported by indirect empirical evidence, which shows that organizational support in employee career development and goal achievement promotes employee sense of thriving (e.g., Coetze, 2019). The above theoretical discussion and empirical evidence lead to:

**Hypothesis 1.** Career growth opportunities are positively related to employees thriving at work.

Career commitment refers to one’s affective response to one’s vocation (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000), while career regret concerns remorse about not choosing an alternative career (Sullivan, Forrett, & Mainiero, 2007). To support the relationships between thriving, and career commitment and regret, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002) argued that learning experiences enhance employees’ self-efficacy which in turn determines their career interests and involvement. The reason is that when people consider themselves as competent in a profession, they develop long-lasting interests in such a career and become more involved in it (Lent et al., 2002). Turning to the current study, thriving is viewed as a state of vigorous learning (Spreitzer, Porath, & Gibson, 2012). Its two components, learning at work and vitality, are both considered as important learning experiences (Chang & Busser, 2020) that strengthen employee self-efficacy (Kleine et al., 2019; Lent et al., 2002). As a result, thriving is likely to foster employees’ interests and involvement in their current career. Under such circumstances, employees are likely to be more committed to their career and less regretful about not choosing alternative vocations. This is supported by empirical research. For example, based on survey data from 300 hospitality employees, Chang and Busser (2020) found that thriving enhances career satisfaction and decreases career turnover intention. In line with these theoretical arguments and empirical evidence, the following is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2.** Thriving at work is positively related to career commitment (2a) and negatively related to career regret (2b).

The discussion above indicates that career growth opportunities help employees develop professional knowledge and positive meaning in their work, which enable them to stay focused on the work tasks at hand, ultimately leading to thriving experiences. It is also argued that a strong sense of thriving can promote positive (e.g., career commitment) and decrease negative (e.g., career regret) career attitudes. This chain of relationship suggests the mediating role of thriving in the relationships between career growth opportunities and career attitudes. Therefore, the following is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3.** Thriving at work mediates the effects of career growth opportunities on career commitment (3a) and career regret (3b).

### 2.2. COVID-19 anxiety: a boundary condition

The high infection and mortality rates of COVID-19 have provoked widespread anxiety among people across the globe (Salari et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2020). In addition, the adverse economic effects of COVID-19 (e.g., business shutdown, massive unemployment, and trade disruption) have induced unpredictability and uncertainty about employees’ future careers and livelihoods (Hite & McDonald, 2020; Pak et al., 2020). All of these factors further exacerbate their feelings of COVID-19 anxiety (Blustein & Guarino, 2020). Noting the extensiveness and severity of such anxiety, researchers (e.g., Trougakos et al., 2020) have continuously called for greater work that investigates the impact of COVID-19 anxiety on employee work and career experiences. Akkermans et al. (2020) conceptualize COVID-19-related variables as contextual factors that interact with individual factors in influencing employee work and career outcomes. In accordance with this perspective, the current study theorizes that COVID-19 anxiety is a contextual moderator that heightens the effect of career growth opportunities on thriving. This moderation effect is supported by job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, which proposes that job demands amplify the positive effects of job resources on work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This is so because resource gain in itself has only modest impact on employee outcomes but attains its saliency under highly stressful situations (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007). In other words, job resources are particularly useful and beneficial when they are most needed (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). An explanation for this is that the use of job resources may be unnecessary for employees with low levels of stress (Seers, McGee, Serey, & Graen, 1983). However, it is in stressful settings that employees are more likely to use resources to cope with stress (Seers et al., 1983). Given that work engagement and thriving are theoretically similar constructs due to their common component of vitality (Kleine et al., 2019), it is reasonable to assume that the amplifying effect of job demands on the resources-engagement nexus can be generalized to the resources-thriving relationship. Applying JD-R theory to the current study, it can be deduced that COVID-19 anxiety creates a stressful work environment because anxiety and stress often co-occur due to their affinity and natural continuity (Antony, Bieling, Cox, Enns, & Swinson, 1998; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Under such circumstances, career growth opportunities are highly needed by employees as a coping mechanism and thus their thriving-enhancing effect is likely to be strengthened. Prior studies have supported the role of stress in heightening the relationship between job resources and employee outcomes. For example, in a survey-based study of employees from a government agency, Seers et al. (1983) found that social support was positively related to job satisfaction for participants reporting high stress, but unrelated for those experiencing low stress. This discussion leads to the following:

**Hypothesis 4.** COVID-19 anxiety moderates the relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving at work such that this relationship is more positive when employees perceive higher levels of COVID-19 anxiety.

### 2.3. Moderated mediation

As discussed previously, Hypothesis 3 proposes the mediating role of thriving in the effects of career growth opportunities on career commitment and career regret. Hypothesis 4 argues for the moderation role of COVID-19 anxiety in the relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving. These two hypotheses suggest a first-stage moderated mediation effect (Hayes, 2013). Owing to COVID-19 anxiety’s amplifying effect on the relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving, it is also expected to strengthen the indirect effects of career growth opportunities on career commitment and career regret via thriving. Therefore, the following is predicted:

**Hypothesis 5a.** The indirect effect of career growth opportunities on career commitment via thriving at work is moderated by COVID-19 anxiety such that this indirect effect is more positive when employees perceive high levels of COVID-19 anxiety.

**Hypothesis 5b.** The indirect effect of career growth opportunities on career regret via thriving at work is moderated by COVID-19 anxiety.
such that this indirect effect is more negative when employees perceive high levels of COVID-19 anxiety.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Research participants and procedures

The entire non-managerial personnel from a Chinese private restaurant company were invited to participate in the current research. In doing so, selection bias is minimized. Participants hold various job positions (e.g., host/hostess, food runner, and server). This company has fully experienced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and is thus deemed as a suitable research context. A two-wave time-lagged research design was used in order to minimize common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). Back translation techniques were adopted for survey translation. The survey data were collected at two time points with a two-week time interval and were matched by numeric codes. At Time 1, a survey that included questions measuring career growth opportunities, COVID-19 anxiety, thriving, and demographic variables was distributed among the employees. Out of the 281 employees, 242 completed the survey at Time 1, leading to a response rate of 86%. Two weeks later (Time 2), a second survey was distributed to the same participants to collect data on their career commitment and career regret. All the respondents at Time 1 completed the survey at Time 2. In the sample, 47% of the participants were female workers. The participants had a mean age of 29.73 (SD = 12.92), and an average organizational tenure of 1.18 years (SD = 1.48).

3.2. Measures

The response format to all measurement items was based on a 7-point Likert scale from “1 = strongly disagree” to “7 = strongly agree”.

3.2.1. Career growth opportunities (Time 1)

Adams’s (1999) 4-item scale was utilized to gauge career growth opportunities. A sample item is: “I feel my present job will help me reach my career goals.” The reliability coefficient (i.e., Cronbach’s alpha) for the scale was .95.

3.2.2. COVID-19 anxiety (Time 1)

COVID-19 anxiety was measured with a 5-item scale by Lee (2020). An example item is: “I feel dizzy, lightheaded, or faint, when I read or listen to news about the coronavirus.” The reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.94.

3.2.3. Thriving at work (Time 1)

Thriving was measured with a 6-item scale from Jiang (2017). Each of the two component constructs was measured with three items. An example item for learning is: “I continue to learn more as time goes by.” A sample item for vitality is: “I feel very energetic.” The reliability coefficient for the overall thriving scale was 0.95.

3.2.4. Career commitment (Time 2)

In line with prior research (Rodwell & Gulyas, 2013), career commitment was gauged with an adapted version of Meyer, Allen and Smith’s (1993) 6-item scale for affective commitment to the occupation. A sample item is: “I am proud to be in my current occupation.” The reliability coefficient was 0.97.

3.2.5. Career regret (Time 2)

Career regret was measured with an adapted version of Brehaut, O’Connor, Wood, Hack, Siminoff, Gordon and Feldman-Stewart’s (2003) 5-item scale for decision regret. An example item is: “The career decision was not a wise one.” The reliability coefficient was 0.97.

3.2.6. Control variables

Existing studies have found that age, gender and tenure can affect employee thriving and career attitudes (e.g. Chung, 2002; Dyrbey et al., 2002; Jiang, 2017; Jiang et al., 2021). As a result, these three variables are included as control variables in all analyses.

3.3. Statistical analysis

The data analysis involved two steps. In step one, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in AMOS to ascertain the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model. Three most commonly used goodness-of-fit indices were adopted to evaluate model fit including the comparative fit index (CFI), the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean residual (SRMR). In step two, the hypothesized relationships were tested by means of regression analyses. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested through multiple regression. The bootstrap-based PROCESS analysis was utilized to examine the mediation effects (Hayes, 2013) as outlined in Hypothesis 3. For Hypothesis 4, hierarchical regression analysis was adopted to test the interaction effect between career growth opportunities and COVID-19 anxiety in predicting thriving. Moderated mediation effects (i.e., Hypotheses 5a and 5b) were examined via PROCESS analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations and correlations of the variables are shown in Table 1. Career growth opportunities were significantly and positively correlated with thriving, which positively related to career commitment and negatively related to career regret to a statistically significant extent.

4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

CFA was conducted to test the hypothesized 5-factor measurement model (i.e., career growth opportunities, COVID-19 anxiety, thriving, career commitment, and career regret). The model fitted the data well; $\chi^2$ (289) = 567.56, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.04, and CFI = 0.96. All of the items loaded onto their respective latent variable as expected and had significant standardized factor loadings higher than 0.40. This indicates the tenability of convergent validity (Kline, 2011). Moreover, all of the variables have reliability coefficients higher than the 0.70 cut-off value (Christmann & Van Aelst, 2006) and average variance extracted (AVE) higher than the minimum accepted level of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This further supports the convergent validity of the variables. Both Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) AVE test and Bagozzi and Phillip’s (1991) approach were used to examine the discriminant validity of the variables. As shown in Table 1, the square roots of AVEs in all instances are higher than the correlations in the corresponding rows and columns. Similarly, following Bagozzi and Phillip’s (1991) approach, it was found from the CFA results that the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for all the correlations among the variables do not contain unity. Results from both tests support the discriminant validity of the study variables (Huo, Boxall, & Cheung, 2020).

5.3. Hypothesis testing

As shown in Table 2, career growth opportunities significantly and positively predicted thriving at work ($b = 0.30, se = 0.05, p < .001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. In line with Hypothesis 2a, thriving at work was positively and significantly related to career commitment ($b = 0.18, se = 0.07; p < .05$). Thriving at work was negatively related to career regret ($b = -0.25, se = 0.09, p < .01$). This supports Hypothesis 2b.

In testing Hypotheses 3a and 3b, the bias-corrected confidence
The positive indirect effect of career growth opportunities on career commitment via thriving was statistically significant. This is because the index of moderated mediation was statistically different. These results support the tenability of Hypothesis 3B. The relationship between COVID-19 anxiety and career opportunities was supported. Moreover, career growth opportunities had a negative indirect effect on career regret (slope = 0.07, 95% CI [−0.13, −0.02]) through thriving. This provided support for the tenability of Hypothesis 3B.

For Hypothesis 4 (the moderating effect of COVID-19 anxiety) are presented in Table 3. First, control variables (i.e., gender, age, and organizational tenure) were entered into the regression equation. Next, COVID-19 anxiety and career growth opportunities were entered. In the last step, the interaction term between COVID-19 anxiety and career growth opportunities was entered. COVID-19 anxiety and career growth opportunities were mean-centered before being entered into the regression equation and the calculation of the interaction term. The interaction term was statistically significant (b = 0.08, se = 0.03, p < .05) in predicting thriving. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported. Fig. 2 depicts the pattern of this moderation effect. In accordance with Dawson (2014), the relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving at work at one standard deviation above and below the mean of COVID-19 anxiety was plotted. Simple slope analysis indicated that the positive effect of career growth opportunities on thriving was stronger when COVID-19 anxiety was high (slope = 0.41, t = 6.47, p < .001) rather than low (slope = 0.18, t = 2.76, p < .01).

Hypothesis 5a was supported by results from PROCESS analysis based on 5000 bootstrap samples. To elaborate, the conditional indirect effect was probed by testing the significance of the indirect effect of career growth opportunities on career commitment via thriving at high versus low levels of COVID-19 anxiety. Results demonstrated that the positive indirect effect of career growth opportunities on career commitment via thriving was stronger and statistically significant for employees who experienced high (b = 0.07, boot se = 0.03, 95% CI [0.01, 0.15]) rather than low (b = 0.03, boot se = 0.02, 95% CI [0.00, 0.07]) levels of COVID-19 anxiety. The index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) was statistically significant (b = 0.01, boot se = 0.01, 95% CI [0.001, 0.037]). This result suggests that these two conditional indirect effects were significantly different.

Hypothesis 5b was tested following the same procedures. Specifically, the negative indirect effect of career growth opportunities on career regret via thriving at work was stronger and statistically significant for employees who experienced high (b = −0.01, boot se = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.06, −0.00]) rather than low (b = −0.04, boot se = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.01, −0.001]). Because the index of moderated mediation was statistically significant (b = −0.02, boot se = 0.01, 95% CI [−0.048, −0.002]), it is further confirmed that these two conditional effects were statistically different. These results support the tenability of Hypothesis 5b.

### 5. Discussion

Anchored in the socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), the current study proposed that thriving at work would serve as a mediator that links career growth opportunities to increased career commitment and decreased career regret. Moreover, in line with...
JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), it was postulated that COVID-19 anxiety would represent a moderator that heightens the relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving, and that amplifies the indirect effects of career growth opportunities on career commitment and regret through thriving. Results based on two-wave survey data from Chinese restaurant workers supported all of the hypotheses. These findings have important theoretical implications.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

First, the study showed that career growth opportunities enhance employees’ experiences of thriving. This supports the socially embedded model of thriving. A plausible reason is that opportunities for career advancement enable employees to develop professional knowledge and positive meaning in work. This prompts agentic work behaviors (e.g., task focus), consequently leading to thriving experiences at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). This result enriches the socially-embedded model of thriving by identifying a previously unexamined determinant of thriving—career growth opportunities. Such opportunities strengthen feelings of job security (Chay & Aryee, 1999) and thus are valuable and most needed job resources particularly for hospitality professionals who face uncertainty about their future employment due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Second, it was found that thriving was positively related to career commitment and negatively related to career regret. A plausible reason for this is that learning experiences at work (a core component of thriving) help employees develop general self-efficacy (Kleine et al., 2019), which promotes their interests and involvement in their chosen career (Lent et al., 2002). In such situations, employees are likely to experience more career commitment and less career regret. This finding contributes to the limited research on the effect of thriving on career outcomes.

Third, the mediating role of thriving in the relationships between career growth opportunities, and career commitment and regret was verified. This extends Son and Kim’s (2019) work-engagement-based mediation process by providing an alternative psychological explanation (i.e., thriving) for the relationships between career growth opportunities and career outcomes. This also responds to the continuous call in the JD-R literature for more research on the explanatory mechanisms (in addition to work engagement) linking job resources to employee outcomes (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). According to Schaufeli and Taris (2014), a major limitation of JD-R theory is that it only describes what kind of job resources and job demands affect what kind of employee outcomes but provides no explanations for why this would be so. The current finding on the mediation role of thriving addresses this issue by integrating the socially embedded model of thriving into JD-R theory as an explanatory underlying framework.

Fourth, the current work identified Covid-19 anxiety as a moderator that amplifies the positive relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving and, as a result, heightens the indirect effects of career growth opportunities on career commitment and regret via thriving. This suggests that the effects of career growth opportunities on thriving (directly) and employees’ career attitudes (indirectly) are stronger when they face high levels of anxiety triggered by COVID-19. The implication is that the work environment that is most beneficial for learning and motivation to develop new behaviors is one where there are high levels of resources but in which workers have high psychological demands at the same time (Karasek, 1979). This is endorsed by JD-R theory which argues that job resources are relevant and most needed in highly stressful conditions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This empirical result helps address the dearth of research on how COVID-19 anxiety spills over to influence employees’ work and careers, and how to cope with such anxiety.

Overall, these findings add to our understanding of how career growth opportunities improve thriving experiences and career attitudes of hospitality workers under the current socio-economic turbulence induced by COVID-19. This responds to calls for research that identifies relevant job resources to protect employee outcomes during the current crisis.
pandemic (Akkerman et al., 2020). In addition, this study has tested and confirmed the applicability of the socially embedded model of thriving in the COVID-19 context and broadened this model by ascertaining a previously unstudied enabler of thriving (i.e., career growth opportunities) and by taking an interactionist perspective. Moreover, the heightening effect of COVID-19 anxiety on the relationship between career growth opportunities and thriving confirms Akkerman et al.’s (2020) contention that the implications of COVID-19 for people’s work and careers are determined by the interplay between COVID-19-triggered variables and job resources.

5.2. Practical implications

The study has important practical implications. The first relates to the value of career growth opportunities in fostering employees’ positive psychological state (i.e., thriving) and career attitudes. In the current COVID-19 era when employers cannot promise job security (Blustein & Guarino, 2020), career growth opportunities are a highly valuable job resource because such opportunities contribute to employment security and employability (Chay & Aryee, 1999). In view of this fact, it is advised that HR managers in the hospitality sector review their current training and career development programs to ensure that they are maximizing the opportunities for employee growth that the organization possesses. They should review the effectiveness of current HR practices (e.g., performance appraisal systems) in making employees aware of their strengths and development needs, and how they can advance their careers within the organization. In addition, the current study verified the mediating role of thriving between career growth opportunities and career attitudes. Therefore, thriving can be used as an indicator and an enabler of employee career commitment and retention (Chang & Busser, 2020). This implies that for hospitality business leaders who are concerned about such career outcomes among their employees, they should regularly monitor and enhance the level of employee energy and learning at work (i.e., components of thriving). Last but not the least, the moderating role of COVID-19 anxiety in heightening the effects of career growth opportunities on thriving and career attitudes suggests that career growth opportunities are most needed and most beneficial for employees experiencing high COVID-19 anxiety. This shows that career growth opportunities are effective job resources in helping employees cope with the negative human consequences of COVID-19. Therefore, employers who are thinking about how to attract and retain hospitality professionals beyond the COVID-19 era should ensure they provide such opportunities for their employees.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

The current study has four limitations. First, a repeated measure design was not adopted in the study, despite the fact that the survey data were collected at two different time points, to minimize common method bias. As a result, no causal interpretation of the relationship between study variables can be made. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal research design capable of detecting how changes in career growth opportunities impact on changes in thriving, career regret and career commitment. Second, the theoretical model tested in the study contains a single mediator only. This makes it impossible to examine competing mediation processes. Therefore, it is unknown whether thriving would remain a significant mediator after other mediators are included in the model. It would be useful for future studies to test multiple mediators (e.g., work engagement and intrinsic work motivation) in the model. Third, future research could broaden the measures of work and career outcomes by including a greater variety of indicators such as job performance and career satisfaction. Lastly, this study was carried out in a single company. Thus, the generalizability of the findings to other organizational contexts is uncertain. For example, knowledge workers (e.g., accountants and academics) may have a stronger sense of employment security and adapt to flexible work arrangements more easily as compared to hospitality workers. This could alleviate their COVID-19 anxiety and career regret, and improve their career commitment. In view of this fact, future research is advised to test the current conceptual model with data collected from other occupational groups.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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