Psychological Capital as a Mediator in Hospitality Students' Career Aspirations: Insights from Social Psychology

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Abstract

Students' career choices significantly influence their personal, social, and economic futures, particularly in the dynamic field of hospitality. This study examines the career intentions of final-year Hotel and Tourism Management students, emphasizing the mediating role of Psychological Capital in the relationship between Social Psychology constructs—Social Thinking (ST) and Social Influence (SI)—and Career Intention (CI). The study sampled 489 final-year students engaged in mandatory industrial training, ensuring relevance to real-world industry experiences. Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire, and analysis was performed using SPSS and Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that both ST and SI positively impact CI, indicating the significance of social psychological factors in shaping students' career aspirations. Psychological Capital, comprising hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism, was found to partially mediate the relationship, highlighting its critical role in strengthening students' intentions to pursue hospitality careers. These findings offer valuable insights for educators, institutional policymakers, and industry practitioners. Integrating Psychological Capital and social psychology-focused interventions into hospitality curricula could better equip students for future careers. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of fostering a supportive educational and industrial training environment to enhance students' psychological resources and career readiness.

Keywords: Career Intentions, Influencing Factors, Psychological Capital, Social Thinking, Social Influence, Social Psychology, Hospitality Student

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, employability remains a critical concern for higher education institutions (Herbert et al., 2020), particularly in the rapidly evolving global tourism and hospitality industry. The sector's continuous growth has placed increasing pressure on educational institutions to adapt and expand their offerings to meet industry demands. In Malaysia, where tourism significantly contributes to the national economy, addressing the human capital gap in the hospitality sector is vital for sustaining the industry's long-term development and competitiveness (Kusumawardhana, 2019). As a result, higher education institutions are tasked with producing graduates who are well-equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in this dynamic field (Yusof et al., 2020).

Universities are under increasing pressure to prepare students for the workforce by integrating skill-based elements into their curricula (Mehraj et al., 2023). In hospitality and tourism management programs, practical training opportunities, such as internships (Pusiran et al., 2020), play an essential role in shaping students' career intentions (Ibrahim et al., 2020). These internships allow students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application by gaining hands-on industry experience, building professional networks, and refining career aspirations. Contextual learning through on-the-job training not only enhances technical skills but also facilitates the development of managerial competencies through observation and practice (Hyasat et al., 2022; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021).

Despite the benefits of such experiential learning (Lin et al., 2023), students face several challenges that hinder their employability. These include a lack of clear career identity, limited relationship-building skills, and insufficient psychological drive to navigate the complexities of the labor market. Addressing these barriers requires a deeper understanding of the psychological factors influencing career intentions (Liu et al., 2022). Psychological Capital, a positive psychological construct comprising hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy (Luthans, 2002), has emerged as a critical determinant of students' ability to overcome these challenges. Psychological Capital not only enhances students' self-confidence but also equips them with the resilience needed to adapt to industry demands and uncertainties.

This study aims to investigate the mediating role of Psychological Capital in the relationship between social psychological factors, namely Social Thinking and Social Influence, and hospitality students' career intentions. Social Thinking, which involves self-awareness and perception of one's role in a broader social context, and Social Influence, encompassing external pressures and encouragement, are essential determinants of career decisions. By examining these relationships, this research provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and industry practitioners to design targeted interventions that enhance students' Psychological Capital, ultimately improving their career readiness and employability in the competitive hospitality sector.

Literature Review
Career Intentions of Hospitality Students

Career intentions describe the aspirations and plans that students formulate regarding their professional futures, encompassing both immediate and long-term goals after completing their studies (Wasti, 2023). These intentions reflect students' career objectives and provide a foundation for the actions and decisions they make as they transition into the workforce. Studies have consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between career intentions and career success, which is characterized by the psychological and tangible outcomes individuals derive from their professional experiences (Chang & Busser, 2020; Karim et al., 2024). For instance, career satisfaction has been identified as a significant contributor to career intentions. A study conducted by Abid et al. (2021), found that organizational support plays a key role in enhancing job satisfaction, which, in turn, positively influences career aspirations.

Multiple factors shape career intentions, including individual characteristics, organizational dynamics, and contextual influences (Karim et al., 2024). Budjanovcanin and Woodrow (2022) highlighted that poorly informed career choices can lead to dissatisfaction, frustration, and a waste of resources, emphasizing the importance of strategic career planning. Firouznia et al. (2021) observed that supportive leadership, autonomy, and engaging work environments are instrumental in cultivating positive career intentions. These elements enable individuals to develop realistic career expectations, align their aspirations with achievable goals, and make informed career decisions (Chang & Busser, 2020).

The hospitality and tourism industry, recognized for its rapid expansion and economic contributions, has created significant demand for a skilled and adaptable workforce (Sampaio et al., 2024). Fresh graduates entering this sector are expected to meet these demands by showcasing industry-relevant skills, professional capabilities, and a strong commitment to their career paths (Schultheiss et al., 2023). However, the industry faces persistent challenges, including high employee turnover (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021) and a lack of clear career identity (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), which can deter career satisfaction and professional growth (Herbert et al., 2020).

Psychological Capital (PsyCap) has emerged as a key concept in addressing these challenges. Defined by four core components—hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy (Luthans & Youssef, 2007), PsyCap equips individuals with the emotional resilience and motivation required to succeed in demanding professions (Wahid et al., 2023). Within the hospitality context, these attributes are especially crucial given the industry's high-pressure environment and dynamic nature (Fadzil et al., 2022).

This study posits that PsyCap serves as a mediator between social psychological constructs—Social Thinking and Social Influence, and the career intentions of hospitality students. By fostering PsyCap, educational institutions can help students better navigate industry challenges, reduce turnover rates, and enhance their readiness for professional roles. Ultimately, this approach not only benefits students by improving career satisfaction but also addresses the growing demand for a diverse and skilled workforce in the hospitality sector.

Social Psychology

Social psychology examines how individuals' thoughts, emotions, and actions are shaped by the presence of others—whether actual, perceived, or internalized—and by social norms (Wilson & Timothy 2022). This field aims to advance both theoretical insights and practical solutions to enhance interactions among individuals and groups. The discipline of social psychology revolves around three primary dimensions: social thinking, social influence, and social behaviour (Mehrad et al., 2023). Social thinking pertains to how individuals form perceptions, make interpretations, and evaluate themselves and others (de Saint Laurent, 2020). In contrast, social influence focuses on the way's external elements, such as societal norms, roles, and group dynamics, affect human behaviour (Weiß et al., 2024). This study highlights social thinking and social influence as central social psychological factors that impact career intentions among hospitality students. These relationships are explored further by incorporating Psychological Capital as a mediating factor, which consists of essential elements such as hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy.

Social Thinking (ST)

Social thinking skills which can ultimately improve students' character (Hariyanto et al., 2022). Furthermore, students' social thinking skills can play an important role in helping them choose careers by teaching them how to think in social situations (Hariyanto et al., 2022). According to Chan (2018) and Koçak et al. (2021), parents may introduce their children to friends, business colleagues, or other associates who share their children's career goals. Parents can also encourage their children to learn as much as they can about their interests (Ghosh, 2019). Choosing a career based on their preferences or their parents' preferences allows children to discover exciting career opportunities (Onoshakpokaiye, 2022).

Social Influence (SI)

One of the determining factors for an individual's future career is social influence, which includes family, teachers, and friends (Hadiyati & Astuti, 2023). Thus, according to one of Azjen's TPB variables, social influence falls under the subjective norm or the perceived social force for engaging in a specific behaviour. This is a function of the referent's views, and it represents social pressure exerted on consumers by their families, relatives, or close friends, and it is considered before an individual engages in a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). As supported by previous study, according to Porfeli and Lee (2012), who is quoted in the study done by Yean and Chin (2019), have mentioned that if students find a career that they believe is a good fit for them, and they will learn more about it and seek information from reliable sources (Pham et al., 2024) because they have already been exposed to numerous career sources through textbooks, close friends, and multimedia. Furthermore, their parents can serve as role models for career advice and may indirectly influence their children's career choices, particularly during the stage of looking for suitable career opportunities (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021).

Psychological Capital (PsyCap)

Psychological Capital, comprising hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience (Luthans, 2002), has recently emerged as a critical construct for applying positive psychology in the workplace (Qudus et al., 2022). Ngoma and Ntale (2016) and Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) highlight the importance of targeted training sessions in developing students'

Psychological Capital. Such training equips students with the essential knowledge and resilience to adapt to and thrive in volatile job markets. Similarly, Fadzil et al. (2022) found that enhancing individuals' Psychological Capital through targeted training strengthens their connections to social networks, thereby creating valuable opportunities to advance their careers and improve employability. Conversely, individuals who lack such training opportunities often face difficulties in establishing professional networks and developing the psychological readiness required to achieve career success (Wahid et al., 2023). Career choices play a pivotal role for students entering professional education (Zaini et al., 2021), as they profoundly impact their professional trajectories and future achievements (Mutanga et al., 2023). Researchers link this challenge to universities' failure to effectively impart employability skills, limited exposure to social networking opportunities at local, regional, and international levels, and graduates' inadequate psychological preparedness to confront challenges with hope, optimism, and resilience (Ngoma & Ntale, 2016) . Sulistiobudi and Kadiyono (2023) highlight that the integration of career identity and Psychological Capital enables students to face challenges confidently. It enhances their self-efficacy in handling demanding tasks, nurtures optimism for present and future success, and fosters perseverance toward achieving goals. Additionally, when needed, it supports the redirection of efforts toward new objectives, ensuring continuous progress and achievement (Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

The Study Framework

The framework for this study (see Figure 1) has been developed based on both the theoretical background that informs it and the specific hypotheses it entails, with career intention as the criterion variable. The explanatory variables are social thinking and social influence, while psychological capital (PsyCap) is the mediator. the study investigates how social thinking and social influence impact career intention, with Psychological Capital (PsyCap) acting as a mediating factor. Social thinking refers to the cognitive processes through which individuals perceive, evaluate, and interpret themselves and others within a social context. It plays a critical role in shaping how students form career intentions by influencing their decision-making processes. Social influence, on the other hand, encompasses the ways in which external factors, such as societal expectations, peer pressure, and group dynamics, impact an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, including career choices.

Psychological Capital (PsyCap), which includes hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy, is proposed as a mediator in this framework. It suggests that the way social thinking and social influence shape students' thoughts and behaviors about their careers can be enhanced or moderated by the psychological resources they possess. Specifically, PsyCap helps students navigate the uncertainties and challenges of career decision-making, fostering a more positive outlook, greater confidence in their abilities, and increased perseverance in the face of obstacles. These psychological resources, in turn, strengthen their career intentions, making them more committed and motivated to pursue their professional goals.

This framework also highlights the potential influence of social behavior, though it is not the primary focus of this study. Social behavior encompasses the actions and interactions individuals engage in as part of their social environment, which could further mediate or moderate the effects of social thinking and social influence on career intentions. The

relationship between these variables—social thinking, social influence, PsyCap, and career intention—forms the core of the study's exploration, offering insights into how these social and psychological factors work together to shape students' future career paths.

In summary, the study framework presents a comprehensive model where social psychological factors (social thinking and social influence) indirectly shape career intentions through the mediating role of psychological capital, offering a deeper understanding of the various elements that influence students' career decision-making processes.
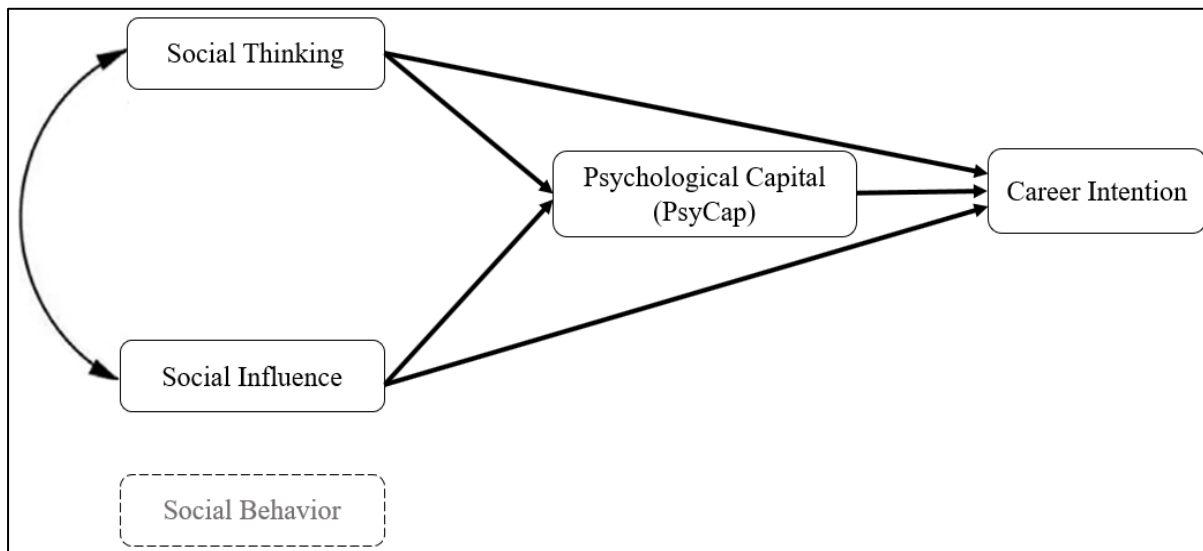

Figure 1: The Study Framework

A Conceptual Model of the Relationship Between Social Psychology and the Mediating Role of Psychological Capital in Hospitality Student Career Intentions
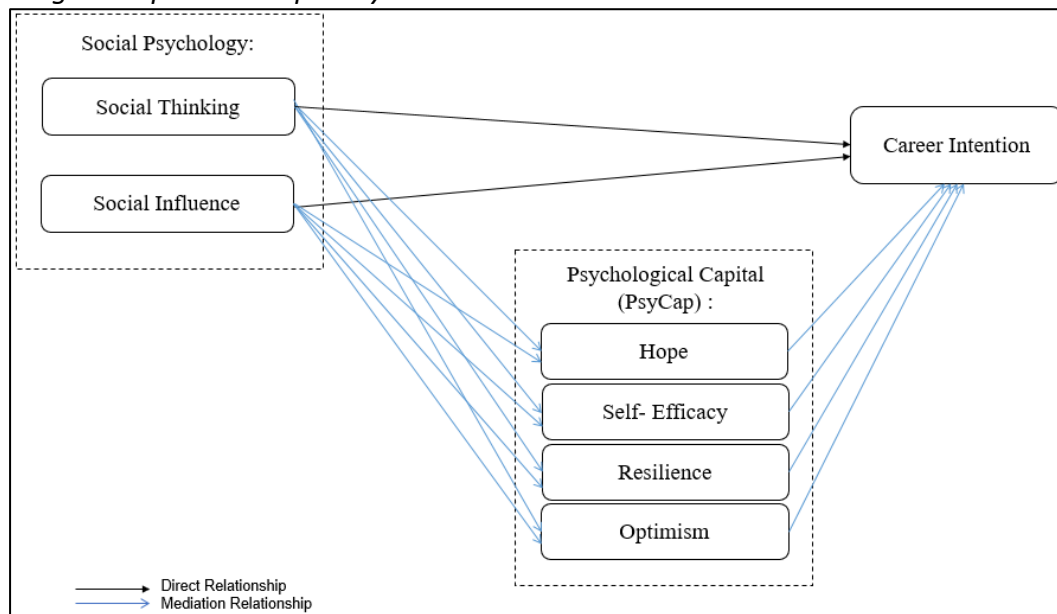

Figure 2: The Conceptual Framework

A conceptual model and hypotheses are proposed in this study, as illustrated in Figure 2. The hypotheses are derived from the conceptual model and literature review:

H^1: Social thinking positively affects students 'career intention.

H^{1a}: Social thinking positively affects students 'career intention mediated by hope.

H^{1b}: Social thinking positively affects students 'career intention mediated by self-efficacy.

H^{1c}: Social thinking positively affects students 'career intention mediated by resilience.

H^{1d}: Social thinking positively affects students 'career intention mediated by optimism.

H^2: Social influence positively affects students 'career intention.

H^{2a}: Social influence positively affects students 'career intention mediated by hope.

H^{2b}: Social influence positively affects students 'career intention mediated by self-efficacy.

H^{2c}: Social influence positively affects students 'career intention mediated by resilience.

H^{2d}: Social influence positively affects students 'career intention mediated by optimism.

Methodology

In this section, SPSS software was used to analyse the data collected, with a focus on the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method, which is an appropriate statistical technique because it helps prevent specification errors, improve the reliability of results, and provide more accurate outcomes while minimising structural errors. A quantitative approach was adopted for the study. Questionnaires were distributed via an online survey using probability sampling to a specific subgroup of final-year Hotel and Tourism Management students at a public higher education institution in Malaysia. A total of 489 final-year diploma and degree students from the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management participated in the study. The

questionnaire was adapted from previous studies: (Amani, 2013), which examined career choice intentions of undergraduate students in Tanzania, and Zhang et al. (2020), which focused on identifying and predicting critical factors influencing tourism and hospitality students' entrepreneurial intentions.

The measurement constructs were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale: 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree), and 5 (Strongly Agree) (Strongly Agree). To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, the study conducted tests for construct reliability and validity. In addition to percentage and descriptive data analysis, hypothesis testing was performed. For this purpose, SmartPLS 4.0 software was used to analyse the relationships between the indicators, as it is suitable for testing the study's proposed hypotheses.

Results and Analysis
The survey was administered three (3) weeks prior to the students' internships ended, resulting in a final response of 399 from 489 identified sample sizes, representing an 82 percent response rate. The survey took into account the respondent profile, such as participation among male (N=68) and female (N=331) respondents, the majority (58.4%) of whom are between the ages of 21 and 25, and the distribution of programmes for diploma (84.5%) and bachelor's degree (15.5%) candidates. The majority of respondents (34.8% on the nominal scale) are majoring in Hotel Management.

Data Analysis: PLS
To test the hypotheses developed in this study, SmartPLS, a variance-based structural equation modelling (SEM) tool, was utilized. The bootstrapping method with 500 resamples was employed to assess the significance of loadings, weights, and path coefficients. The data analysis process involved a two-step approach: first, evaluating the measurement model to assess the reliability and validity of the constructs, followed by the evaluation of the structural model to test the proposed relationships between variables. The results of the PLS-SEM analysis, including the structural model, are illustrated in Figure 3.

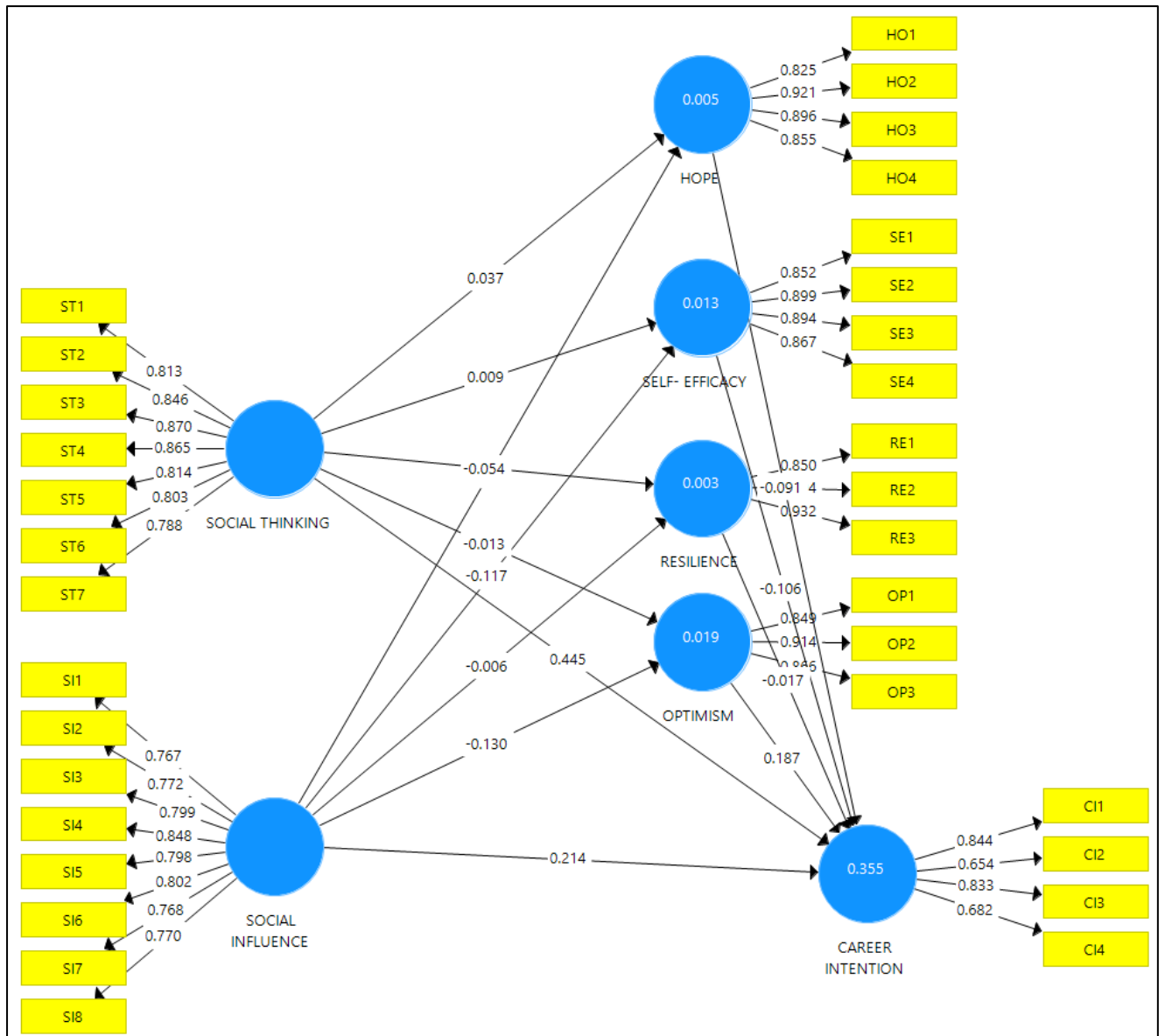Figure 3. PLS-SEM Structural Model

Measurement Model

As shown in Table 1, all factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.5, while the composite reliability values were all greater than 0.7. Based on the guidelines established by Hair et al. (2019), these results confirm that the convergent validity of the measurement model has been established.

Table 1
Result of the Measurement Model

Construct Reliability and Validity:					
Construct	Indicators	Indicator Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Social Psychology					
Social Thinking	ST1	0.813	0.924	0.939	0.687
	ST2	0.846			
	ST3	0.870			
	ST4	0.865			
	ST5	0.814			
	ST6	0.803			
	ST7	0.788			
Social Influence	SI1	0.767	0.914	0.930	0.626
	SI2	0.772			
	SI3	0.799			
	SI4	0.848			
	SI5	0.798			
	SI6	0.802			
	SI7	0.768			
	SI8	0.770			
Psychological Capital (PsyCap)					
Hope	HO1	0.825	0.900	0.929	0.766
	HO2	0.921			
	HO3	0.896			
	HO4	0.855			
Self-Efficacy	SE1	0.852	0.901	0.931	0.771
	SE2	0.899			
	SE3	0.894			
	SE4	0.867			
Resilience	RE1	0.850	0.883	0.924	0.803
	RE2	0.904			
	RE3	0.932			
Optimism	OP1	0.849	0.850	0.908	0.768
	OP2	0.914			
	OP3	0.866			
Career Intention					
Career Intention	CI1	0.844	0.754	0.842	0.575
	CI2	0.654			
	CI3	0.833			
	CI4	0.682			

*Source: Results from SmartPLS 4 software

The next step in the analysis is to assess discriminant validity. Discriminant validity issues arise when the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) values are high (Sarstedt et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2021). Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which a construct is distinct from other constructs(Hair et al., 2021). It is established when the correlations between the measures of the constructs of interest are lower than the correlations between these measures and those of other constructs. To evaluate discriminant validity, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is compared with the correlations between the constructs. Discriminant validity is confirmed if the square root of the AVE is greater than the correlations between the construct and all other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Discriminant Validity of Constructs
Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	CI	HO	OP	RE	SE	SI	ST
CI	**0.758**						
HO	-0.075	**0.875**					
OP	-0.031	0.705	**0.876**				
RE	-0.073	0.733	0.678	**0.896**			
SE	-0.108	0.814	0.712	0.785	**0.878**		
SI	0.446	-0.064	-0.138	-0.035	-0.112	**0.791**	
ST	0.552	-0.008	-0.084	-0.057	-0.054	0.539	**0.829**

*Source: Data processing results (2024)
Notes: Career Intention (CI); Hope (HO); Optimism (OP); Resilience (RE); Self-Efficacy (SE); Social Influence
(SI); Social Thinking (ST); Diagonal elements marked in bold are the square root of average variance extracted
(AVE)

According to Henseler et al. (2015), the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings may not reliably detect discriminant validity in survey-based studies. To address this limitation, they introduced a new approach based on the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) derived from the multitrait-multimethod matrix. Henseler et al. (2015) recommended cut-off values of 0.85 and 0.90 for establishing discriminant validity between two reflective constructs, with an HTMT value of 0.85 being the more conservative criterion. If the HTMT ratio is below 0.85, it indicates that discriminant validity between the constructs is established. As shown in Table 3, the results indicate that all HTMT ratios are below 0.85, confirming that no issues with discriminant validity are present in this study.

Table 3

Results of the Heterotrait Monotrait ratio (HTMT) analysis Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	CI	HO	OP	RE	SE	SI	ST
CI							
HO	0.089						
OP	0.081	0.811					
RE	0.083	0.841	0.795				
SE	0.133	0.915	0.812	0.883			
SI	0.524	0.071	0.155	0.047	0.125		
ST	0.627	0.062	0.095	0.063	0.073	0.582	

*Source: Data processing results (2024) Notes: Career Intention (CI); Hope (HO); Optimism (OP); Resilience (RE); Self-Efficacy (SE); Social Influence (SI); Social Thinking (ST)

Structural Model

The structural model illustrates the relationships between the constructs hypothesized in the research framework. The variance explained (R^2) of the endogenous constructs and the significance of the path estimates provide insight into the goodness of fit of the theoretical model. The R^2 values and path coefficients indicate how well the data supports the proposed model (Hair et al., 2021). Table 4 presents the structural model results based on the PLS output. The analysis found that students' career intentions were significantly related to both social thinking and social influence, thus supporting hypotheses H1 and H2.

An interesting finding from the path coefficient analysis is that the indirect effects of the various component traits were examined to identify reliable selection criteria. However, Psychological Capital (PsyCap) was found not to mediate students' career intentions. As a result, the null hypothesis was accepted, and the alternate hypotheses (H[1a-d] and H[2a-d]), which proposed PsyCap as a mediator, were rejected, as they were strongly unsupported by the data.

Table 4
Hypothesis Results

Hypotheses		Coefficient	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)
H1	ST -> CI	0.445	0.062	7.217***
H1a	ST -> HO -> CI		0.012	0.290 ns
H1b	ST -> SE -> CI		0.011	0.084 ns
H1c	ST -> RE -> CI		0.007	0.131 ns
H1d	ST -> OP -> CI		0.016	0.162 ns
H2	SI -> CI	0.214	0.056	3.790***
H2a	SI -> HO -> CI		0.015	0.511 ns
H2b	SI -> SE -> CI		0.016	0.788 ns
H2c	SI -> RE -> CI		0.007	0.014 ns
H2d	SI -> OP -> CI		0.019	1.289 ns

Notes: Career Intention (CI); Social Thinking (ST); Social Influence (SI); Hope (HO); Optimism (OP); Resilience
(RE); Self-Efficacy (SE)
P-values: *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001; *s-significant; ns- not significant*

Conclusion

This study uncovers new connections between social psychology and the career intentions of hospitality students. It found that both social thinking (ST) and social influence (SI) significantly impact the career intentions of these students. The research offers valuable contributions to both academic literature and the hospitality industry. From a theoretical perspective, the study compiled a comprehensive set of indicators derived from students' internship experiences and empirically tested them among undergraduate students. These findings advance our understanding of the factors influencing hospitality students' career intentions.

Practically, the study holds important implications for hospitality educators and industry practitioners. Given the ongoing concerns about the hospitality industry's ability to recruit and retain talent, the research highlights the need for improved strategies to shape students' career intentions and better prepare them for the workforce. Based on the findings, the study proposes recommendations for three key stakeholders: universities, industries, and students, to facilitate smoother transitions into employment. First, universities should foster stronger connections between students' academic experiences and industry expectations. Second, industry players must acknowledge that students often lack work experience, leading to uncertainty about their futures. Mentorship programs can play a crucial role in helping students navigate this uncertainty. Mentors should take proactive steps to understand students' needs before internships and help them set realistic expectations for their first work experiences. This guidance can significantly influence their career intentions in the hospitality sector post-graduation. Third, since internships are critical for students' career choices, hotels and hospitality organizations should implement vocational skills training programs for interns and offer meaningful job opportunities to apply these skills. Additionally, hotels should

introduce students to the corporate culture, career opportunities, and the process of adapting to the professional environment.

Finally, students must have realistic expectations and a clear understanding of their career paths. They need to transition from being college students to becoming employees equipped with a well-rounded professional knowledge base and a mindset prepared for the challenges of the hospitality industry. Although the lack of prior industry experience may make it difficult for students to connect classroom learning with real-world applications, recognizing these challenges can help them better navigate the transition into the workforce.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of aligning students' academic experiences with industry needs and expectations. By addressing these connections, stakeholders can enhance the career prospects of hospitality students and strengthen the industry's talent pipeline. The motivation for this study arises from the pressing need to nurture future-ready graduates capable of thriving in a competitive and uncertain job market. By exploring Psychological Capital (PsyCap), this research highlights an often-overlooked yet pivotal factor in career decision-making among hospitality students. The findings aim to guide educational institutions and policymakers in designing interventions to enhance PsyCap, ultimately fostering a resilient and motivated workforce.

This work also contributes to the broader discourse by integrating insights from social psychology into hospitality education, offering a fresh perspective on student development. Furthermore, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by situating PsyCap within the unique demands and challenges of the hospitality domain. By doing so, this study not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides actionable insights for cultivating entrepreneurial and professional mindsets among hospitality students.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that no conflict of interest could affect the results of this research.

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