

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

The educational quality perception, professional interest, and career choices among hospitality postgraduate students

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Abstract

Brain drain has become an important issue throughout the health service sector, with gender imbalance and employment discrimination leading to an increasing number of master's graduates opting to leave the profession. To explore this issue, the study examines the impact of both internal and external factors on the employment choices of postgraduate students, which starting from the core factor of the quality of higher education and combined with the professional interest as personal factor. The study adopts the questionnaire survey method to collect questionnaire data from 338 hospitality postgraduate students in China's institutions of higher education. The study adopts Multiple Linear Regression analysis to draw the following conclusions: 1) there is a significant influence of educational quality perception on career choice, the higher the level of educational quality perception, the stronger the students' willingness to choose this field for career development; 2) there is a significant effect of professional interest on career choice, the higher the student's level of interest in the major, the greater the willingness to choose this field for career development. 3) Identity mediates the relationship between educational quality perception (and professional interest) and career choice, which means that educational quality perception and professional interest can contribute to career decisions by promoting students' identity; 4) Future work self positively moderates the relationship between identity and career choice. The clearer the students' goals for their future job development, the stronger the effect of professional identity on career choice. The research conclusions have positive implications for higher education and career guidance for postgraduate students in hospitality management. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2023; 27 [2]: 92-100).

Keywords: Educational quality perception, professional interest, identity, career choice, future work self

Résumé

La fuite des cerveaux est devenue un problème important dans tout le secteur des services de santé, le déséquilibre entre les sexes et la discrimination dans l'emploi conduisant un nombre croissant de diplômés de maîtrise à choisir de quitter la profession. Pour explorer cette question, l'étude examine l'impact des facteurs internes et externes sur les choix d'emploi des étudiants de troisième cycle, en partant du facteur central de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur et combiné avec l'intérêt professionnel en tant que facteur personnel. L'étude adopte la méthode d'enquête par questionnaire pour collecter les données du questionnaire auprès de 338 étudiants de troisième cycle en hôtellerie dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur chinois. L'étude adopte une analyse de régression linéaire multiple pour tirer les conclusions suivantes : 1) il y a une influence significative de la perception de la qualité de l'éducation sur le choix de carrière, plus le niveau de perception de la qualité de l'éducation est élevé, plus la volonté des étudiants de choisir ce domaine pour le développement de carrière est forte ; 2) il y a un effet significatif de l'intérêt professionnel sur le choix de carrière, plus le niveau d'intérêt de l'étudiant pour la majeure est élevé, plus la volonté de choisir ce domaine pour le développement de carrière est grande. 3) L'identité médie la relation entre la perception de la qualité de l'éducation (et l'intérêt professionnel) et le choix de carrière, ce qui signifie que la perception de la qualité de l'éducation et l'intérêt professionnel peuvent contribuer aux décisions de carrière en promouvant l'identité des étudiants ; 4) Le futur travail personnel modère positivement la relation entre l'identité et le choix de carrière. Plus les objectifs des étudiants pour leur futur développement professionnel sont clairs, plus l'effet de l'identité professionnelle sur le choix de carrière est fort. Les conclusions de la recherche ont des implications positives pour l'enseignement supérieur et l'orientation professionnelle des étudiants de troisième cycle en gestion hôtelière. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2023; 27 [2]: 92-100).

Mots-clés: Perception de la qualité de l'éducation, intérêt professionnel, identité, choix de carrière, futur travail personnel

Introduction

As a labor-intensive industry, hospitality industry need a mass of outstanding talents to a large

extent^{1,2}. In order to meet the market demand for talent, more and more universities in the world set up the major of health and service management, and begin to establish a comprehensive cultivation

system of bachelor's, master's and doctor's degree so that they can provide various types of professional talents for the hospitality industry. However, with the change of production structure, employment environment and other factors, the talent attractiveness in the hospitality industry has decreased significantly. Especially for China, a typical developing country, there are obvious problems such as the imbalance of male to female ratio, the greater pressure of female fertility and a serious imbalance between the higher education for hospitality professional and the practice of the Chinese hospitality industry: Inherent dilemmas such as high-intensity work, low pay, irregular working hours and even social discrimination lead to an unsatisfactory outcome^{3,4}. Because of the COVID-19 epidemic, postgraduate students majoring in hospitality industry choose other industries as the starting point of their career^{5,6}.

It is very important to understand the career choice mechanism of Chinese hospitality management students, which involves the balanced development of employment, higher education, line operation and other aspects. Most of the existing studies have analyzed the brain drain in hospitality industry from the macro perspective of discipline system, industry dilemma and management policy, while few studies have systematically demonstrated the hospitality graduate students from the perspective of career management based on the micro level. Therefore, in order to better answer the question "What influences hospitality management postgraduate students' choice of employment in their major" this study further explores the influence mechanism and condition mechanism of employment choice intention from the systematic perspective of external factors (educational quality perception) and internal factors (professional interest).

There are 3 main purposes of this paper: 1) From the dual perspectives of external educational factors and internal interest factors, this study identifies the influencing factors of employment choice for hospitality postgraduate students. 2) Further discussed the mediating role of identity. 3) From the individual perspective, finding out the boundary conditions that affect the employment choice of hospitality management postgraduate students.

Literature review and hypotheses

Educational quality perception and career choice

The origins of the concept of educational quality can be traced back to service quality. From the perspective of commodity economics, education can also be understood as a special service. Although the concept of higher education quality has emerged in many research fields^{7,8}, the specific academic definition of educational quality is not clear at present⁹. Through reviewing the existing literature, it is clear that current studies generally agree that the higher education quality has a positive impact on students' world view, cognitive emotion and behavior patterns¹⁰. Although the relevant academic definition is not clear at present, combined with the common features of existing studies, this paper defines the perception of educational quality as the sum of the features that students perceive that the school can meet their own educational needs and potential demands for knowledge and skills, or it can also be the standard/degree to which students can obtain the demand for education. Lee *et al.* divided the quality of education in hospitality into five dimensions: student support, industry network, innovative curriculum, learning environment and teachers' quality¹¹. Brookes found that hospitality students were sensitive to the perception of educational quality, library resources and recreational sports facilities¹². The definition of this paper includes all the teaching resources covered by the above studies, especially focusing on the two dimensions of academic staff guidance and teaching quality.

Employing qualified workers in the hospitality industry will help to improve the quality of service, and effectively maintain the competitiveness and sustainability of the enterprises. Therefore, higher education in this field is one of the important factors in the development of human resources. Although the number of hospitality colleges and graduates with high degrees has increased globally, a number of studies have shown that there is still a large talent gap in the hospitality industry, and many crucial developmental jobs are stagnated due to the lack of talents with professional counterparts^{1,2}. In order to

better define the retention phenomenon of professional talent cultivation, the study adopts the variable of career choice, and describes it as the behavior (intentions) of students to choose to develop their career in their major field. According to the Career Motivation theory, the educational quality perceived by students is an external positive resource, which helps individuals to make certain behavioral decisions¹³. Studies have shown that teaching quality significantly affects the career choice of students that majoring in service related majors¹⁴. A large number of studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between students' perceived educational quality and satisfaction, while there is an inevitable relationship between satisfaction and students' career choice^{15,16}. Ali *et al.* pointed out that the quality of higher education services has a significant impact on students' satisfaction, which affects their career loyalty¹⁷. Accordingly, this paper proposes:

Hypothesis 1: The perception of educational quality positively influences the career choice of hospitality postgraduate students.

Professional interest and career choice

Interest is the internal psychological motivation formed in the process of information acquisition, learning, exploration and cognition. It can stimulate individuals to maintain a high degree of attention, activeness and initiative to the things they pay attention to. Professional interest refers to higher education researchers' interest in the study, research and application of their own specialized fields, including their subsequent career development¹⁸. The classical theory of motivation points out that the internal motivation of individuals is more conducive to self-improvement and then individuals can implement appropriate behaviors^{13,18}. According to the definition, interest is a kind of internal motivation that can stimulate individuals' learning or attention as a driving force¹⁹. Studies have shown that professional interest can promote individuals' social skills, knowledge management behaviors and work values²⁰. Accordingly, this paper proposes:

Hypothesis 2: Professional interest positively influences the career choice of hospitality postgraduate students.

The mediating role of identity

Self-identity refers to students' attitude toward the goal, social value and other factors of their major and future professional field²¹. It can also be interpreted as the degree of approbation of hospitality management postgraduate students for this profession²². This variable explains the extent to which individuals define themselves by professional disciplines and career development, which can include relevant elements such as professional learning, work and development, and professional involvement (Vivekananda-Schmidt *et al.*)²³. Once students feel that the educational quality in the subject is not as expected, they will have more antipathy towards this major, and also their sense of identity is not easy to develop. Similarly, professional interest is one of the internal motivations of individuals, students with higher interest will have a higher sense of identity in hospitality. Under the role of internal driving force, individual interest further promotes the development of identity. Accordingly, this paper proposes:

Hypothesis 3: The educational quality perception positively affects identity.

Hypothesis 4: Professional interest positively affects identity.

Hypothesis 5: The identity positively affects the career choice of hospitality postgraduate students.

Based on the above reasoning, this paper further speculates that identity plays a mediating role in two paths of educational quality perception - career choice and professional interest - career choice respectively. Sultan and Wong argued that perceived service quality exerts an indirect influence on behavioral intention through the mediating of satisfaction and students' trust²⁵. Liu *et al.* found that career resistance can further affect students' career decisions through the mediation of professional identity²⁶. Accordingly, this paper proposes:

Hypothesis 6: Educational quality perception affects career choice through the mediation of identity.

Hypothesis 7: Professional interest affects career choice through the mediation of identity.

Future work self as moderator

As an individual motivation factor, future work self can motivate hospitality postgraduate students to

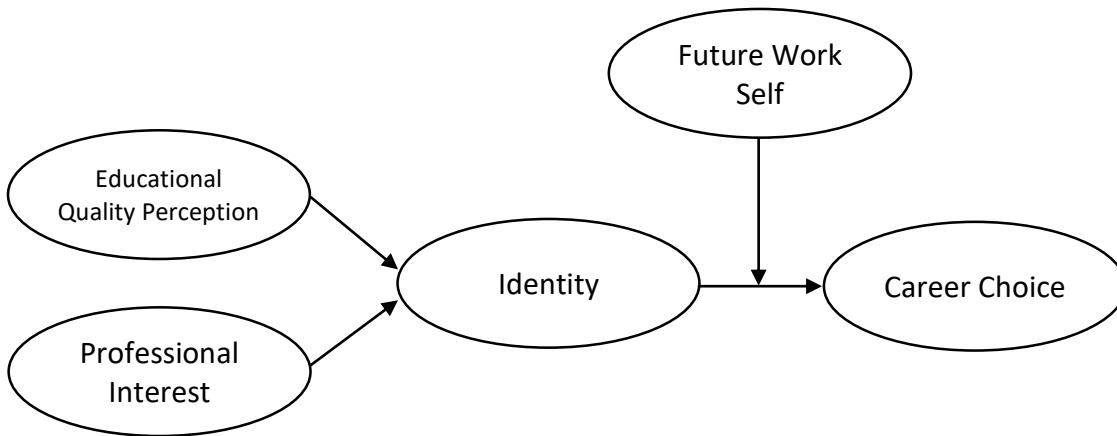


Figure 1: Research model

actively manage their own careers, that is they are more likely to choose professional fields for employment based on the premise of strong professional identity. The concept of future work self comes from “possible self”, which refers to the potential cognition of self-embodiment that an individual may have in the future career field, mainly manifested in two dimensions of clarity and detail^{27,28}. According to the Career Construction Theory, individuals will make a comparative analysis based on their current understanding and future judgment, and then make a suitable choice of employment²⁹. This paper holds that future career self, as an individual’s prospective cognition of future self, will regulate the relationship between current students’ identity and employment choice. In other words, for the postgraduate students majoring in hospitality management, the clearer and more specific the direction of their future professional field, the stronger the influence of identity on career choice will be. Accordingly, this paper proposes:

Hypothesis 8: Future career self positively moderates the strength of the relationship between identity and career choice, namely the higher the level of students’ future work self, the stronger the effect of identity on career choice.

Based on the existing theoretical basis and the above demonstration, this paper further proposes a moderated mediation model (see Figure 1), namely the mediating effect of identity on educational quality perception, professional interest and career choice will be moderated by the

individual’s future career self. Hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 9: The indirect effect strength of future job self-regulation on educational quality perception, identity and career choice. The higher the level of future job self-regulation, the stronger the mediating strength of identity between educational quality perception and career choice.

Hypothesis 10: The indirect effect strength of future job self-regulation on professional interests-identity-career choice. The higher the level of future work self, the stronger the mediating strength of identity between professional interest and career choice.

Methods

Data collection and sample characteristics

The study used the convenience sampling method to recruit postgraduate students in hospitality management through the Credamo platform and social media sharing on WeChat using online resources. (1) On the Credamo data platform, the study sets a strict standard for the respondents, who should be postgraduate students in hospitality management at universities to participate in this research. (2) To ensure the adequacy and validity of the sample, relying on the resources of universities in South China, the researchers sent survey links to the WeChat group of hospitality postgraduate students in South China, inviting students to participate in the survey by snow-

balling, and all students who participated in this survey would be rewarded with a certain amount of red packets. A total of 500 online participants from the above two channels participated in the survey. Among them, 88 participants were asked to terminate the survey due to professional inconsistency, non-graduate degrees, graduated to work, and other reasons. Among the remaining samples, 74 were identified as invalid data because they failed the attention test. Finally, 338 valid samples were collected, with a sample validity rate of 67.6%. The sample information is as follows: From the perspective of sample characteristics, males account for 32.5 % and females account for 67.5%. The average age of the students surveyed is 24.07 years old. From the perspective of training methods, 84.6 % of them are academic masters and 15.4 % are professional masters.

Variable measurement

Since the initial scale was in English, the study followed the back translation procedure to translate the original English questionnaire items into Chinese³⁰, and bilingual researchers in hospitality management and normal professionals were invited to proofread the English and Chinese versions of the scale. In addition to the demographic characteristics of the survey section, all variables were measured using a five-point Likert-type measure, 1 represents strongly disagree, and 5 represents strongly agree.

Refer to the scale of Annamdevula and Bellamkonda's¹⁰, the educational quality perception was measured in 11 items (Kahraman and Demirdelen)²⁴. Sample questions such as "The teaching staff has good teaching practice experience", "Courses can increase students' knowledge", and so on; The measurement of professional interest refers to the 3-item scale of Ogbuanya and Chukwuedo²⁰, such as "I am interested in my major"; The measurement scale of identity comes from the 5-item scale of London³¹, such as "I am willing to do some challenging things in my professional study or work"; The measurement of career choice refers to the 2-item scale of Walsh *et al.*¹⁶, such as "I will join the industry after graduation"; The future work self was measured by Strauss *et al.*²⁸'s 5-item scale, such as "I know exactly what I want to be in my future work". Finally, to exclude the influence of irrelevant variables on the dependent variable

(career choice), referring to the practice of existing research, this study controls factors such as gender, age, type of institution, major, grade level, and training methods (Kahraman and Demirdelen)²⁴.

Data analysis methods

In this study, SPSS23.0 was used for descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, reliability and validity analysis, and then Amos 21.0 software was used for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the discriminant validity of variables. Finally, the main effects, mediating effects, moderating effects, and moderated mediating effects were analyzed by SPSS-PROCESS Macro (Hayes)³² and multiple linear regression.

Results

Descriptive analysis and common method bias

To explore the relationship between the various variables, Before testing the hypothesis, Pearson Correlation Coefficients were used to explore the relationships between key variables. Correlation analysis showed (Table 1) that career choice was significantly and positively correlated with educational quality perception ($r= 0.44$, $p< 0.01$), professional interest ($r= 0.47$, $p< 0.01$), and identity ($r= 0.39$, $p< 0.01$). There was also a significant positive correlation between identity and educational quality perception and professional interest. The descriptive statistical results preliminarily supported the basic hypothesis proposed in this paper.

To test the potential impact of common method bias, according to Podsakoff *et al.*³³, single-factor Harman test was performed on all variables in the five-factor model. The results showed that the maximum variance interpretation rate of the first factor was 18.55%, and the cumulative variance interpretation rate was 59.60%. The variance interpretation rate of the first factor was less than half of the cumulative variance interpretation rate, so there was no obvious common method bias in this study.

Reliability and validity analysis

The Cronbach α values of all variables were higher than the standard value of 0.7, indicating a high

Table 1: Descriptive correlation analysis and reliability and validity test

variables	Mean ± SD	1	2	3	4	A	CR
1 Educational quality perception	4.14±0.51					0.88	0.87
2 Professional interests	4.07±0.70	0.69**				0.77	0.77
3 Identity	3.98±0.58	0.45**	0.42**			0.79	0.79
4 Career Choice	4.07±0.92	0.44**	0.47**	0.39**		0.86	0.86
5 Future work self	3.67±0.80	0.53**	0.57**	0.57**	0.51**	0.91	0.90

** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. α is Reliability, CR is Composite reliability

Table 2: Multiple linear regression results

	Career choice				Identity		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Intercept (constant)	3.69***	3.44***	3.54***	3.47***	3.83***	6.63***	3.65
Control variable							
Gender	-0.08	-0.07	-0.06	-0.03	-0.06	-0.06	-0.05
Age	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01
Type of institutions	-0.12*	-0.02	-0.02	0.01	-0.06	-0.00	0.00
Major	-0.02	0.01	0.00	-0.02	0.02	-0.04	0.04
Grade	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.08	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01
Training methods	-0.05	-0.03	-0.05	-0.07	0.06	0.05	0.06
Independent variable							
Educational quality perception		0.38**	0.27*	0.14		0.51***	0.34***
Professional interest		0.41***	0.36***	0.26**			0.18**
Mediator variable							
Identity			0.30***	0.20*			
Adjusting variable							
Future work self				0.32***			
Interactive projects							
Future Work Self × Identity				0.20*			
R ²	0.05*	0.27***	0.30***	0.35***	0.02	0.21***	0.23**
Adjusted R ²	0.03*	0.25***	0.28***	0.33***	0.01	0.19***	0.22**
ΔR ²	-	0.22***	0.03***	0.05***	-	0.18***	0.03**
F	2.83*	15.10***	15.38***	15.80***	1.36	12.53***	12.51***

level of internal consistency (see Table 1). The composite reliability (CR) ranged from 0.77 to 0.90. The study used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the measurement models of educational quality perception, professional interest, identity, and career choice. CFA results show that the five-factor model fits the data better than the other four alternative models ($\chi^2_{(289)} = 569.81$; CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.05), indicating that the reliability and validity of the scale is good, and meet the criteria of the research.

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 proposes that educational quality perception and professional interest positively impact the career choice of

hospitality postgraduates respectively. Table 2 shows that educational quality perception has a significant positive impact on career choice (Model 2, $\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, professional interests have significantly positive impacts on career choice (Model 2, $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, both hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 were supported.

To further test the role of the relationship between educational quality perception, professional interest, identity, and career (Hypothesis 3-5), after controlling the irrelevant variables. It is found that educational quality perception positively affects identity (Model 6, $\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$), and hypothesis 3 is supported. Similarly, professional interest positively affects identity (Model 7, $\beta = 18$, $p < 0.01$), and hypothesis

Table 3: Analysis of the moderated mediating effect

Moderated Mediation Path	Moderator Variables	Moderated Level	Indirect Effect	Standard Error	95 % Confidence Interval	
					LLCI	ULCI
Educational Quality Perception - Identity - Career Choice	Future work self	High	0.18	0.10	0.0176	0.4032
Professional Interest - Identity - Career Choice		Low	0.03	0.09	-0.1282	0.2415
		High	0.13	0.06	0.0357	0.2804
		Low	0.02	0.06	-0.0958	0.1583

4 is supported. The positive impact of identity on career choice is significant (Model 3, $\beta = 30$, $p < 0.001$), and hypothesis 5 is supported.

Adopting SPSS-PROCESS to test hypotheses 6 and 7 (the mediating role of identity in both paths) (Hayes, 2013)³². The study used Model 4 (Mediation model) and set the number of Boots-trappings to 5000. As shown in table 3, the mediating confidence interval results of identity in the perception of educational quality perception and career choice ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.18$, $SE = 0.08$, $LLCI = 0.0556$, $ULCI = 0.3767$) do not includes 0, reaching a significant level. The direct impact of educational quality perception on career choice is still significant ($\beta_{\text{direct effect}} = 0.58$, $SE = 0.10$, $LLCI = 0.3862$, $ULCI = 0.7715$, the confidence interval does not include 0), indicating that identity plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between educational quality perception and career choice, hypothesis 6 is supported. Similarly, the mediating confidence interval results of identity between professional interest and career choice ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.12$, $SE = 0.05$, $LLCI = 0.0368$, $ULCI = 0.2408$) also do not contain 0, reaching a significant level, and the direct impact of professional interest on career choice is still significant ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.48$, $SE = 0.07$, $LLCI = 0.3427$, $ULCI = 0.3127$). It shows that identity also partially mediates role in the relationship between professional interest and career choice, hypothesis 7 is supported.

Hypothesis 8 suggests that future career self moderates the relationship between identity and career choice. Table 2 shows that the interaction between future work self and identity has a significant positive effect on career choice (Model 4, $\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$). Simple slope analysis was used to further explain the relationship between identity and career choice at different future work self-levels (mean \pm 1SD). When the level of future work self is high, identity has a strong impact on career choice ($\beta = 0.47$, $t = 3.76$, $p < 0.00$). However, when the level of future work

self is low, the influence of identity on career choice becomes insignificant ($\beta = 0.08$, $t = 0.87$, $p > 0.05$). Hypothesis 8 is supported.

Finally, further verified the moderating role of the future work self in the two mediating effect paths (Hypothesis 9 and Hypothesis 10). According to the regulatory mediation model analysis paradigm, the study set the Bootstrap number to 5000 times and established model 14. The results show that (Table 3), in the path of educational quality perception and career choice, the mediating effect of identity ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.18$, $Boot SE = 0.10$, $LLCI = 0.0176$, $ULCI = 0.4032$, the confidence interval does not include 0) reaches a significant level when the future work self is high, the reverse is not significant. Similarly, in the path of professional interest and career choice, the mediating effect of identity ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.13$, $Boot SE = 0.06$, $LLCI = 0.0357$, $ULCI = 0.2804$, the confidence interval does not include zero) reaches a significant level when the future work self is higher, the reverse is not significant. Thus, hypothesis 9 and hypothesis 10 are supported.

Conclusion

Firstly, the educational quality perception and professional interest can positively and significantly interfere with the employment choice intention of postgraduate students. Secondly, students' identity with professional work plays a partially mediating role in both paths. Thirdly, the future work self is the conditional factor that can effectively promote students' career intention choice.

Implications

Theoretical implications

Although the academic community has made great efforts to pay attention to the antecedents of employee turnover, there are relatively few

explorations from the perspective of students majoring in medical and reproductive health care. Fortunately, there are a few studies that have been conducted to explore the career choices of hospitality students³⁴. Compared with the existing literature, this paper mainly makes the following contributions: Firstly, from the dual perspectives of external educational factors and internal interest factors, this study identifies the influencing factors of employment choice for hospitality postgraduate students. Consistent with the findings of Kahraman and Demirdelen²⁴, we also conclude that educational quality perception affects career choice. In addition, we also clarify that professional interest is also an important antecedent of career choice. This is a supplement to the existing literature, which helps to find the internal and external factors of hospitality management students' career choices. Secondly, this paper further explores the mediating role of identity and finds the internal mechanism of intervening in health care students' employment choices. Finally, after clarifying the cause mechanism of employment choice, this paper explores the boundary conditions of the influence path of employment choice from the individual perspective. Through relevant theories and literature evidence, this paper constructs the antecedents and conditions that affect the career choice of hospitality postgraduates; and expands the applicability of career management theory in the field of hospitality education to a certain extent. The exploration of postgraduate groups can also add some comparative significance to the previous research on undergraduate groups, helping the academic community to arrive at more comprehensive and diverse research findings, and promoting the theoretical research progress in the field of hospitality education.

Educational implications

Focusing on the topic of education management and employment options for postgraduate students majoring in medical and reproductive health care, the study draws the following four aspects of educational enlightenment based on the specific conclusions: First it is suggested to overallly improve the educational quality of Chinese hospitality management. Second, from the perspective of internal driving factors, guide and cultivate hospitality management postgraduate

students' career interests. Third, focusing on students' identity with hospitality professionals is conducive to matching higher education with society's talent delivery. Finally, actively guide students to understand and think about their future career development.

Limitations and future research directions

Due to the influence of many factors such as research conditions and environment, there are still some research limitations in this study. First of all, in terms of data collection, the research adopts the cross-sectional research design to collect data. In the future, longitudinal data can be used. Secondly, the diversity selection of control variables needs to be improved. Finally, future research can be carried out in African countries to make cross-cultural comparison with China, so as to draw more universal conclusions.

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