Article

Behind the Kitchen Doors: Unveiling Post-COVID Challenges and Sustainable Solutions for Chefs in the Hospitality Sector

Kurtulus Ozbasar, Mehmet Bahri Saydam *[ID]**, Ali Ozturen**[ID] **and Mehmet Guven Ardahan**

Faculty of Tourism, Eastern Mediterranean University, Famagusta 99628, Turkey;
kurtulus.ozbasar@emu.edu.tr (K.O.); ali.ozturen@emu.edu.tr (A.O.); guven.ardahan@emu.edu.tr (M.G.A.)
* Correspondence: mehmet.saydam@emu.edu.tr

Abstract: This study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted barriers experienced by chefs working within the dynamic and demanding landscape of the hospitality industry. By delving into the intricacies of their work environment, we aim to shed light on the day-to-day hurdles they encounter, offering a detailed understanding of the obstacles they face. In our study, we employed a qualitative research framework to investigate the challenges faced by chefs in the hospitality sector, focusing on their unique experiences. Our data collection involved in-depth interviews with chefs in North Cyprus. Our findings reveal seven predominant problems within the culinary industry, encompassing workload and stress, customer expectations, menu creativity and innovation, team dynamics, career advancements, ingredient sourcing, and technology and automation. These insights serve as a valuable resource for industry professionals and researchers alike who are committed to enhancing the culinary profession and elevating the dining experience for customers. The originality of this study lies in its unique focus on addressing the underrepresented area of research concerning the specific barriers faced by chefs in the tourism and hospitality industry. By exploring the day-to-day hurdles encountered by chefs, this research contributes to both academic knowledge and practical insights that can enhance industry practices and ultimately improve the quality of dining experiences for guests.

Keywords: chefs; hospitality; restaurant; post-COVID challenges; sustainable decent work; Leximancer

1. Introduction

The concept of "decent work" signifies a high standard of employment accessible to anyone willing to work [1]. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), decent work involves productive employment characterized by freedom, fairness, security, and dignity, coupled with adequate compensation and social protection [1]. This notion is intricately linked to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which focuses on decent work and economic growth [2,3]. SDG8 strives for "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth" and aims to ensure "full and productive employment and decent work for all" [4]. Promoting decent work, social justice, and gender equality within the tourism and hospitality sectors is essential for fostering sustainable tourism growth. In the post-COVID-19 era, the hospitality industry faces significant challenges that necessitate a renewed focus on sustainable practices [5] and decent work conditions to ensure long-term resilience and growth [6–9].

Consequently, the culinary world has become notorious for its proclivity to induce burnout and thwart the pursuit of a harmonious work-life equilibrium [10,11]. Alarming statistics underscore the pervasive mental health challenges that afflict culinary professionals; a notable 2019 survey reported that a staggering eight out of every ten individuals working within the realm of professional kitchens have encountered mental health issues over the course of their careers [12]. Further exacerbating this predicament, research conducted by the Unite Union revealed that a disheartening 52% of chefs harbor a negative

outlook toward their chosen profession, with only a meager 22% willing to recommend this arduous path to prospective school-leavers. In the wake of the pandemic, there are nascent indications that the enforced hiatus within the hospitality industry may herald a transformative shift towards a more salubrious professional landscape [13]. These statistics underscore the pressing need to investigate the challenges and realities chefs face in the demanding world of the tourism and hospitality industry.

Research on chefs is underrepresented in the hospitality literature, particularly studies focusing on their specific challenges [14]. To the best of our knowledge, such research remains scarce. For example, a study by Ariza-Montes et al. [15] focused on subjective well-being in European countries. Another recent study by Bressan et al. [16] focused on how the future of the chef's profession is perceived. Filimonau et al. [17] focused on food waste from the lens of chefs working in the United Kingdom. Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou's [18] piece sought to understand chefs' skills and competencies for successful careers. These studies highlight important facets of the chef's role but do not fully address the specific and multifaceted challenges faced by chefs in their daily professional lives. This gap is significant because it impacts not only the chefs' work environment but also the overall quality of service in the hospitality sector. The lack of comprehensive research on this topic limits our ability to develop effective strategies to support chefs and enhance their contributions to the guest experience. To address this gap, our study aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the challenges chefs face in their daily work. By examining the complexities of their work environments, this research seeks to offer a detailed understanding of these challenges and generate practical insights for industry practices. Our study is timely and relevant, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reshaped the tourism and hospitality sector, presenting both unprecedented challenges and opportunities for sustainable development [19–21].

Understanding the specific hurdles encountered by chefs is essential for formulating strategies that support their well-being and professional growth while enhancing the resilience and sustainability of the hospitality industry. This research not only contributes to academic discourse but also offers practical implications for improving policies and practices within the sector. By illuminating the realities faced by chefs, we aim to inform and guide efforts toward fostering a more adaptive, supportive, and thriving hospitality industry in the post-pandemic era.

2. Literature Review

Chefs in the Hospitality Sector

Since the late 20th century, the chef profession has been increasingly glamorized, largely due to the rise of celebrity chefs, their books, and television shows. This has drawn many young individuals to pursue culinary training; however, research highlights several significant challenges in the education and development of chefs, particularly those aiming for executive positions in the hospitality industry. With a growing emphasis on sophisticated cuisine, chefs face numerous challenges, as they must be highly skilled and well-prepared to deliver top-quality food and service to guests. Issues such as staff turnover have been linked to a lack of skills, productivity problems, and chef shortages, posing challenges for both human resource management (HRM) and business operations. Some businesses have had to scale back growth plans or struggle to operate efficiently as a result. The only two reports on the chef profession highlight the evolving nature of chef roles, emphasizing the demand for classical chefs (61%) while noting a decline in full-time chefs and a shrinking labor pool, which complicates recruitment efforts [18].

Chefs play a vital role in the growth and prosperity of the hospitality and tourism sector. Given the swiftly evolving landscape of this industry, it is crucial for individuals, including chefs, to undergo professional training. Achieving long-term success in professional competence development necessitates chefs' sustained involvement in the industry. This emphasizes the importance of chefs upholding culinary excellence and consistently

enhancing their skills to keep pace with industry changes [8]. Below is recent chef-related research with hospitality samples portrayed (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of the selected past and recent chef-related research with hospitality samples.

Authors	Country	Research Approach	Main Findings
Ariza-Montes et al. [15]	Europe	Quantitative	Chefs' job satisfaction is an important antecedent to increasing subjective well-being.
Bressan et al. [16]	Australia/Vietnam	Qualitative	Results showed various factors that adhered to knowledge management as well as the concepts of the knowledge-based view of the firm.
Cooper et al. [22]	Great Britain/Ireland	Qualitative	The results depicted that chefs have a strong occupational identity and culture.
Filimonau et al. [17]	United Kingdom	Qualitative	Corporate rules discourage chefs from preventing food waste.
Graham et al. [23]	United Kingdom	Qualitative	Chefs stated passionately regarding social reality and shared perceptions of kitchen work are shifting due to exposure to guests.
Magrizos et al. [11]	Greece	Qualitative	Chefs with seasonal employment endure extremely challenging conditions while working extended 10 h shifts.
Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou [18]	United Kingdom	Quantitative	Findings underlined that chefs in commercial kitchens should reveal strong managerial and leadership skills
Robinson et al. [24]	Australia	Mixed-method	Unrequited necessity for creativity in job triggers boredom, job malcontent, and turnover decisions.
Shrivastav [25]	Australia	Qualitative	Basic cooking skills and culinary knowledge were the most important themes found in the study.

In recent years, the role of a chef has gained considerable societal significance due to the proliferation of television programs featuring renowned chefs. However, despite the apparent glamour associated with the profession, being a chef is noteworthy for its substantial workload, high levels of stress, and, with few exceptions, limited public recognition [15]. Broadly speaking, the work culture in professional kitchens is intense and often distinct from the organizational culture found in more conventional workplaces, yet it remains an area with limited research. Kitchen working conditions are frequently described as high-pressure, demanding, antisocial, unstable, and unpleasant, with compensation often being average or below average. Common stressors in a chef's daily life include excessive workloads, feeling underappreciated, and poor communication. Chefs are often expected to perform at their best despite staff shortages and malfunctioning equipment. In elite gourmet kitchens, the work environment can be even more extreme, shaped by dominant masculine ideals of dedication, independence, aggression, and competition [14]. As suggested by Burrow et al. [26], the life of an accomplished chef can be both exhilarating and rewarding, as well as monotonous, demeaning, and dehumanizing. Multiple studies have confirmed that chefs frequently operate in demanding and high-pressure environments [15].

In addition, our search highlights the lack of evidence regarding the challenges chefs face in the tourism and hospitality industry domain. That is, as shown in Table 1, none of the empirical studies have yet explored the challenges that chefs face in the tourism and hospitality industry.

3. Materials and Methods

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the difficulties encountered by chefs in the hospitality sector, with a specific emphasis on the experiences of chefs themselves. We employed a qualitative research framework to gather and analyze empirical data. This research approach was chosen for two key reasons. Firstly, qualitative research was deemed most suitable for the study's purpose, allowing for a thorough exploration of the challenges faced by chefs. Secondly, previous research often centered on identifying

the factors influencing various job outcomes using a quantitative approach. Therefore, this qualitative study was designed to provide fresh insights into the challenges experienced by chefs. Moreover, while earlier studies typically concentrated on the perceptions of front-line employees in the hospitality sector, we aimed to broaden the research scope by including chefs' perspectives. Expanding the research focus seeks to enrich the existing body of knowledge by incorporating the unique experiences and challenges faced by this specific group within the industry. In this study, a total of 26 chefs participated (see Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Pseudonym of Participant	Age	Gender	Position	Sector Type
Augustus	51	M	Executive chef	5-star hotel
Theodora	32	F	Sous chef	4-star hotel
Leonidas	41	M	Executive sous chef	5-star hotel
Cicero	34	M	Sous chef	Restaurant
Pericles	29	M	Sous chef	4-star hotel
Ptolemy	32	M	Executive sous chef	Restaurant
Isolde	40	F	Executive sous chef	Restaurant
Semiramis	45	F	Pastry chef	Cafe
Hermes	51	M	Executive chef	5-star hotel
Xenia	44	F	Executive sous chef	5-star hotel
Pythagoras	33	M	Executive sous chef	5-star hotel
Socrates	45	M	Executive sous chef	4-star hotel
Demeter	27	F	Sous chef	5-star hotel
Calliope	30	F	Sous chef	5-star hotel
Galen	34	M	Executive sous chef	Restaurant
Aristotle	38	M	Executive sous chef	5-star hotel
Seneca	40	M	Sous chef	5-star hotel
Herodotus	38	M	Executive sous chef	5-star hotel
Athena	35	F	Executive sous chef	4-star hotel
Cleopatra	41	F	Executive sous chef	Restaurant
Hades	60	M	Executive chef	5-star hotel
Poseidon	43	M	Executive sous chef	5-star hotel
Aphrodite	31	F	Pastry chef	Restaurant
Eros	56	M	Executive chef	5-star hotel
Ares	49	M	Executive sous chef	4-star hotel
Persephone	34	F	Executive sous chef	5-star hotel

To achieve this objective, we conducted in-depth interviews with chefs located in North Cyprus. The participants were deliberately selected based on the principles of qualitative sampling, where statistical representation and scale are not the primary considerations [27]. Instead, the qualitative research sample's precision and rigor are determined by its ability to accurately represent significant characteristics.

The basis for employing purposive sampling lies in the researchers' a-priori theoretical understanding of the subject. They anticipate that specific individuals may possess valuable perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation [28]. Data saturation was achieved following 26 interviews. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, engaging in face-to-face, one-on-one interactions with the participants. These interviews, which typically spanned approximately 30 to 40 min each, were conducted between 18 February and 30 March 2024. They were carried out either at the chefs' workplaces or at mutually agreed-upon locations, such as cafes. The interview questions were carefully designed to align with the research objectives. In cases where further clarification or elaboration was needed, the researcher probed the interviewees for additional insights [28].

Throughout the interview process, comprehensive notes were diligently taken before, during, and after the interviews to capture both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the discussions [28]. Subsequently, the collected data underwent thematic analysis using Leximancer software. Leximancer software stands out as a powerful tool in the realm of qualitative data analysis, offering distinctive advantages over other packages like ATLAS.ti®

version 8.0, NVivo 14, MAXQDA 2020, and others [29]. Leximancer's unique strength lies in its text analytics and automated content analysis capabilities. Unlike traditional qualitative analysis software that relies heavily on manual coding and tagging, Leximancer employs advanced algorithms and natural language processing to autonomously identify and analyze recurring themes, concepts, and patterns within textual data [30]. This innovative approach not only saves researchers considerable time and effort but also reduces the risk of human bias in the analysis process. Additionally, Leximancer excels in its ability to create visual concept maps, providing researchers with a clear, intuitive visualization of the data's structural relationships [31].

4. Results and Discussion

The data was processed through Leximancer software (Version 5.0), a tool designed for qualitative data analysis, especially for scrutinizing interview transcripts [32]. Leximancer, in this context, was employed to examine and unveil high-level themes, concepts, and insights from the collected data. Through a meticulous review of the twenty-six interview transcripts, seven dominant themes emerged (Figure 1). These included: 1—workload and stress; 2—customer expectations; 3—menu creativity and innovation; 4—team dynamics; 5—career advancements; 6—ingredient sourcing; and 7—technology and automation.
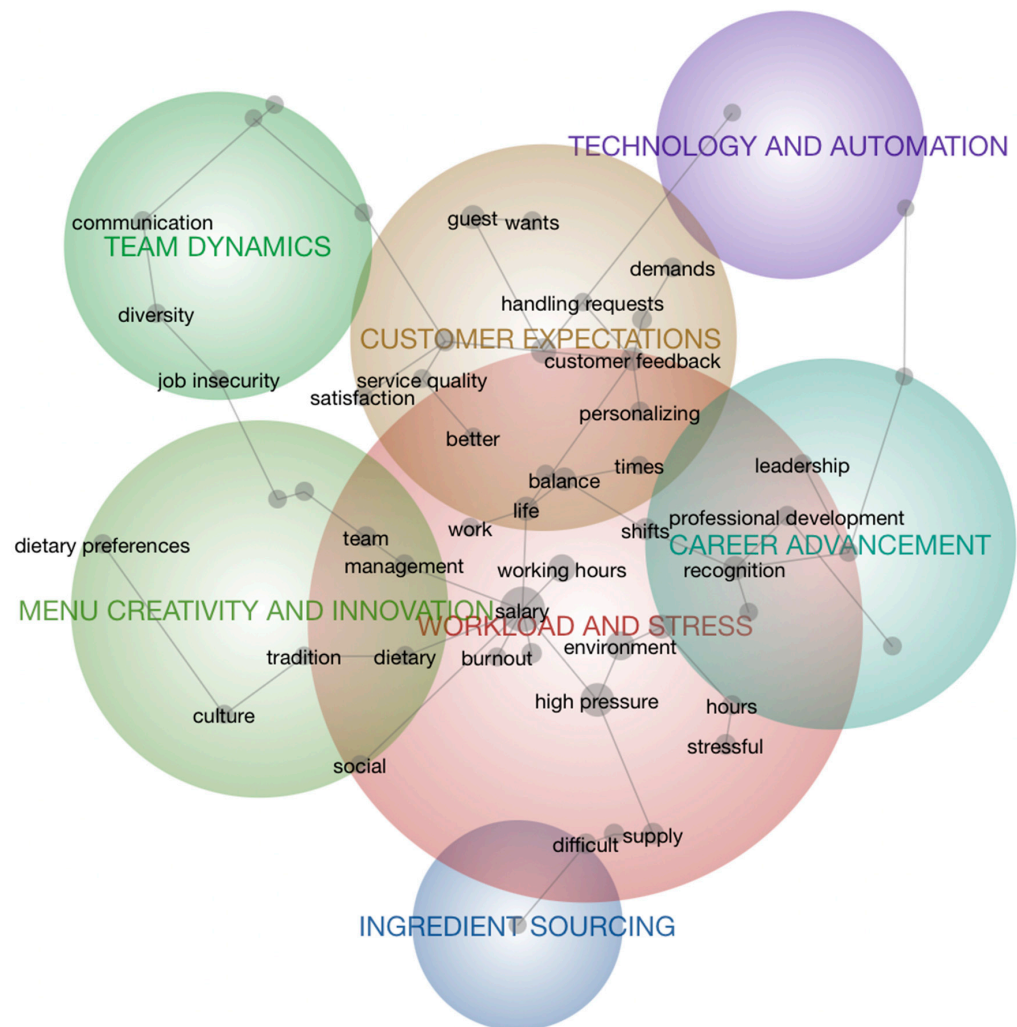

Figure 1. Concept Map.

Upon a comprehensive analysis of all the transcripts, it became evident that the theme "workload and stress" held the most prominent position. Furthermore, the study explored the extent to which other themes were interrelated with the primary theme of

"workload and stress" (Table 3). The results indicated that "customer expectations" had a 61% connection rate, while "menu creativity and innovation" and "team dynamics" had a 31% connection rate. "career advancements" held a 21% connection rate, and "ingredient sourcing" and "technology and automation" were linked at a rate of 12%. The word count matrices depicted in Table 4 for the derived concepts provide insight into the associations.

Table 3. Themes and their degrees of connectivity.

Themes	Connectivity
Workload and stress	88
Customer expectations	61
Menu creativity and innovation	31
Team dynamics	31
Career advancements	21
Ingredient sourcing	12
Technology and automation	12

Table 4. Frequency count matrix.

Themes (Concept Count in Brackets Is the Single Word Occurrence)	Customer Expectations	Menu Creativity and Innovation	Team Dynamics	Career Advancements	Ingredient Sourcing	Technology and Automation
Workload and stress (27)	24	18	21	17	15	11
Customer expectations (21)	-	27	10	17	14	18
Menu creativity and innovation (18)		-	10	8	12	15
Team Dynamics (16)			-	21	7	10
Career advancements (18)				-	5	9
Ingredient sourcing (16)					-	7
Technology and automation (12)						-

4.1. Workload and Stress

Workload and stress among chefs represent critical concerns within the culinary profession [25]. Chefs, as the orchestrators of gastronomic experiences, confront a myriad of stressors that can significantly impact their physical and mental well-being [15]. The demanding nature of kitchen work translates into long, arduous hours, often extending well beyond the typical 9-to-5 schedule. The preparation and service of meals during peak dining hours necessitate relentless dedication, often leading to irregular work shifts and minimal time for rest and recuperation [8]. In our study, we found the theme of workload and stress as a frequently mentioned theme among respondents. As depicted in Figure 1, the key concepts used together with the theme of workload and stress were high pressure (21 times), salary (17 times), working hours (15 times), work-life balance (15 times), shifts (13 times), and burnout (11 times).

One of the respondents stated "*I've been through burnout many times during my career. It happened because of the constant stress and working very long hours. Burnout shows up as feeling extremely tired, both physically and mentally. It also makes me lose motivation, and sometimes I even stop loving cooking*" (Augustus, M, 51). Another respondent mentioned, "*The hard parts of my job can sometimes affect my personal life. It can be tough to stop thinking about work and relax, especially on tough workdays. This makes it harder to enjoy my free time.*" (Theodora, F, 32). Another chef mentioned, "*The stress I experience at work, especially due to long hours and high pressure, can sometimes make me question if the salary I earn is enough for the effort I put in*" (Leonidas, M, 41). Our findings are concordant with the findings of Chuang and Lei [33] and Tongchaiprasit and Ariyabuddhiphongs [8]. The cited authors also found that high pressure, salary, working hours, and shifts are the main drivers of stress among chefs. Shrivastav [25] found that also documented chefs' problems, such as work hours, in the kitchen context.

4.2. Customer Expectations

Customer expectations are paramount in the hospitality industry because they serve as the foundation upon which the entire guest experience is built. Understanding and meeting these expectations is crucial for achieving guest satisfaction and fostering loyalty [34]. In our study, customer expectations were mainly mentioned. Respondents used several concepts with the theme of customer expectations, such as customer demands (15 times), service quality (14 times), satisfaction (12 times), and social media (10 times). One chef stated, "*Dealing with excessive special requests can be challenging. Some customers have unrealistic expectations or make last-minute demands that disrupt the kitchen's workflow*" (Cicero, M, 34). Another chef's response is as follows; "*We know that not every meal can be flawless, but we try to learn from those times when things don't go perfectly. We like it when guests talk to us about what's bothering them, and if we can, we try to fix it*" (Pericles, M, 29). One chef underlined the issue of the social media–customer expectation nexus as follows; "*The rise of social media and food influencers has created an environment where people come in with extremely high expectations based on what they've seen online. They want dishes to look exactly like the perfectly styled photos they've seen on Instagram*" (Ptolemy, M, 32). In line with our findings, understanding and managing customer expectations is pivotal in the hospitality industry, where handling requests, maintaining service quality, and ensuring customer satisfaction are intertwined [35,36]. Meeting these expectations not only enhances the dining experience but also fosters loyalty and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, driving the success of restaurants in a highly competitive market [37]. In line with the aforesaid information, Malik et al. [34] found that once the expectations of customers are met, it leads to satisfaction and, finally, customer loyalty in the hospitality setting.

4.3. Menu Creativity and Innovation

Creativity holds a central role in the culinary arts, much like it does in various other forms of art. In culinary practice, creativity is described as the artistic and innovative presentation of food, a means for chefs to express their inner artistic vision, and an endeavor to infuse creativity into gastronomic creations [38]. Conversely, food innovation is identified as a novel and superior interpretation of culinary elements, both in terms of their physical presence and symbolic meaning, often undertaken by accomplished chefs [39]. In our study, interviewees frequently mentioned the theme of menu creativity and innovation. With this theme, interviewees mostly used concepts such as culture (20 times), culinary trends (19 times), food supply (18 times), dietary preferences (11 times), and products (8 times). Some chefs mentioned the following: "*In our sector, understanding culture is crucial. It helps us connect with our diners personally and allows us to introduce them to new flavors and traditions*" (Isolde, F, 40). Another interviewee said, "*One challenge we have in the kitchen is keeping up with new food trends. We always create new menu ideas that match what's popular right now so our customers are excited to try our dishes*" (Semiramis, F, 45). One participant mentioned, "*We need to make food that suits different preferences, like vegetarian, vegan, or special diets. This can be hard, but it's also a chance for us to develop new ideas*" (Xenia, F, 44). Current literature also underlined the importance of creativity and innovation. For example, research by Mohanty et al. [40] revealed that food innovation is influenced by several factors, such as recipe development and customer satisfaction. Again, concordant with our findings, Lee et al. (2019) [41] discovered that two major challenges limit creativity and innovation when generating and putting innovative ideas into action: resistance from staff to change and customers not embracing innovations. Lee et al. [41] found that the main problem of innovation/creativity in restaurants is marketing, and promoting newly implemented innovations was reported to be the most significant barrier. Another research also found parallel findings with our research that creativity is an important factor among chefs [8].

4.4. Team Dynamics

Working well together in a restaurant is very important, and it matters a lot in the whole hospitality industry. In a busy restaurant kitchen, teamwork is the strong foundation

that ensures every meal is great. It's important that chefs, sous chefs, cooks, and servers can work together smoothly, especially when things get busy. This helps us ensure all the dishes are cooked perfectly and served on time [42]. Effective communication within the team is essential for coordinating tasks and promptly addressing any issues that may arise during service [43]. In our research, respondents frequently talked about team dynamics and frequently mentioned concepts such as diversity (7 times), communication (6 times), management skills (5 times), and insecurity (5 times). One interviewee stated, "*Running a kitchen behind the scenes is a bit like running a small business. You have to be good at managing your team, keeping track of supplies, and making sure everything runs smoothly. It's not just about cooking; it's a bigger challenge*" (Pythagoras, M, 33). Another respondent underlined, "*In our country, many restaurant owners hire workers from other countries because labor is less expensive there compared to hiring local workers. This diverse workforce, with people from various cultures and languages working together in the same kitchen, often leads to communication problems*" (Socrates, M, 45). One respondent mentioned that, "*Due to the significant presence of international students in North Cyprus, many of them are employed in kitchens primarily for their affordability, without proper consideration of their culinary talents. This trend has raised concerns about the stability of our profession, and it has left me feeling insecure about the future of my job*" (Isolde, F, 40). Our findings are concordant with the research by Wellton et al. [42] who found that team dynamics as well as teamwork are essential for a productive atmosphere.

4.5. Career Advancements

Individuals working in the hospitality and tourism sectors often pursue self-directed career paths, commonly utilizing strategies for career advancement to enhance their skills and progress in their professions. Those in the service industry frequently operate in demanding settings with considerable job flexibility. Organizations seek employees with greater adaptability and the capacity to contribute their intellectual abilities to uphold organizational competitiveness [44].

Career advancement among chefs is a pivotal aspect of their professional journey in the culinary world. When chefs move from starting jobs to higher ones, they keep learning and improving at cooking [45].

They might become leaders like sous chefs, executive chefs, or kitchen managers. In these roles, they run the kitchen, manage staff, and make important decisions [46]. In light of what was mentioned above, respondents frequently mentioned the theme of career advancements with concepts such as recognition (10 times), professional development (5 times), leadership (4 times), and compensation (4 times). Based on those findings, one interviewee stated, "*It's tough to get credit for all the hard work I do. I work long hours and create cool new dishes, but people don't always notice. Getting recognized isn't just about making me feel good; it also keeps me excited to develop better food ideas*" (Galen, M, 34). Another respondent underlined that, "*Compensation? Man, that's a real headache for us chefs. We bust our backs in those high-pressure kitchens, putting everything into honing our skills*" (Aristotle, M, 38). One interviewee emphasized, "*Professional growth is crucial to competitiveness in the culinary field. I've taken the initiative to seek out my courses and workshops because our workplaces don't always provide sufficient support. It would be highly beneficial if they offered structured programs to help us enhance our skills*" (Ptolemy, M, 32).

4.6. Ingredient Sourcing

One key issue raised by the chefs is the difficulty in consistently procuring high-quality ingredients. In the pursuit of culinary excellence, chefs are often in search of the finest and freshest ingredients to elevate their dishes. However, they frequently encounter challenges related to seasonality, supplier reliability, and the limited availability of certain specialty items. These hurdles can affect the consistency and quality of the dishes they prepare, which, in turn, impacts customer satisfaction. For example, one interviewee mentioned that, "*It's pretty crazy, you know. We live on an island, surrounded by water, yet finding a variety of fish can be a real headache. Our restaurant's menu is all about seafood, and customers expect a*

wide selection. But sometimes, it feels like we're searching for treasure just to get our hands on some fresh catches" (Seneca, M, 40). Another chef highlighted, "*Yeah, man, getting the good stuff for cooking ain't easy. We're all about making our food taste really awesome, and that means finding the freshest, best ingredients we can. But let me tell you, it's not always simple*" (Herodotus, M, 38). Similar problems occurred in a qualitative study by Mac Con Iomaire et al. [47,48], which found that food ingredients as well as supply are a prime concern for chefs.

4.7. Technology and Automation

The integration of automation technologies in tourism and hospitality is inevitable because of the advancement of technology as well as demographic factors that limit the human labor available for service industries [47,49]. The restaurant business also adopts automated services because it relies heavily on labor. Consequently, there have been notable transformations in both the cooking and serving processes within restaurants. In food preparation, technology and automation are more about technology that assists management since it does not involve direct interaction with customers [50]. In line with the aforementioned literature our interviewees also mentioned technology and automation in their narratives. For example, one respondent mentioned, "*Training staff to use kitchen technology is an ongoing struggle. Not everyone is tech-savvy, and it's frustrating when team members struggle with basic software or equipment. We spend much time just teaching them how to navigate these tools*" (Athena, F, 35). Another respondent underlined, "*Due to electricity problems in our country, technology can become a disadvantage for us. In kitchens that rely on technology, such as our hotel, a single device malfunction can disrupt operations significantly*" (Cleopatra, F, 41). Similar findings were also observed in a study by Fraser and Lyon [51] who portrayed the advantages and disadvantages of modernist equipment and technological techniques in the kitchen context.

5. Conclusions

In the realm of hospitality literature, chefs are essential yet often overlooked figures who orchestrate the culinary experiences that define the industry. Previous studies, such as those by Ariza-Montes et al. [15], Bressan et al. [16], Filimonau et al. [17], and Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou [18], have ventured into the thoughts and perspectives of chefs, shedding light on various facets of their profession, from well-being to culinary skills. However, they have predominantly grazed the surface, and a conspicuous gap remains in the exploration of the everyday challenges that chefs in the tourism and hospitality sector grapple with. This void, marked by the absence of a comprehensive understanding of their work lives, significantly impedes our ability to address and alleviate the hurdles they face, with potential repercussions on the quality of service provided.

Our study has endeavored to bridge this research gap. By immersing ourselves in the intricate world 'behind the kitchen doors', we have analyzed interviews from which seven dominant themes have emerged; these included: 1—workload and stress; 2—customer expectations; 3—menu creativity and innovation; 4—team dynamics; 5—career advancements; 6—ingredient sourcing; and 7—technology and automation. These insights offer a fresh perspective on the multifaceted challenges that chefs encounter daily.

Our research not only contributes to academic discourse but also offers practical implications for the dynamic tourism and hospitality industry, where chefs are central to creating unforgettable dining experiences. As we move forward, it is essential that we continue to unravel the complexities of this profession, working collectively to support and empower chefs in their pursuit of culinary excellence. This journey 'behind the kitchen doors' is a testament to the dedication and passion of these culinary artists, and it underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the challenges they face for the betterment of the industry as a whole.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The dearth of comprehensive research dedicated to the challenges faced by chefs within the hospitality industry reveals a significant gap in the existing literature. While the field of hospitality studies extensively examines customer experiences, management practices, and industry dynamics, chefs, who play a pivotal role in crafting memorable dining experiences, have been largely overlooked. Although recent studies have provided valuable insights into various dimensions of the culinary profession, these studies primarily focus on aspects like well-being, the future of the chef's profession, food waste, and skill development [15–18], leaving an evident research void concerning the day-to-day challenges faced by chefs.

This research gap holds substantial theoretical implications. It underscores the significance of our study, which seeks to illuminate the multifaceted challenges encountered by chefs within the dynamic context of the tourism and hospitality sector. By delving into the complexities of their work environments, we contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of chefs' experiences, providing valuable insights that extend beyond our research and encouraging further exploration of the chef's role within the hospitality sector.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Our research offers several management implications. First, our research underscores the critical need for effective workload and stress management strategies within kitchen environments. Hospitality management should prioritize chefs' well-being by implementing measures such as reasonable working hours, mental health support, and clear stress management protocols. Second, our study highlights the significance of aligning restaurant operations with customer expectations. Hospitality establishments should focus on clearer communication between front-of-house staff and chefs to manage customer expectations effectively. By understanding customer demands and coordinating with culinary teams, management can ensure a harmonious and satisfactory dining experience. Third, to stay competitive in the dynamic hospitality industry, management must foster an environment that encourages menu creativity and innovation. Regular brainstorming sessions, experimentation with new ingredients, and collaboration between chefs can lead to fresh and exciting culinary offerings that attract and retain customers. Lastly, effective team dynamics are paramount in the kitchen. Management should invest in team-building activities, communication training, and conflict resolution strategies to enhance collaboration among kitchen staff. A harmonious kitchen environment not only boosts morale but also improves overall kitchen efficiency.

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

While the research design offered valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, our research was conducted in North Cyprus, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to different cultural and geographical contexts. Further studies should explore the challenges faced by chefs in diverse regions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this profession on a global scale. Secondly, the sample size of 26 interviews, while sufficient to achieve data saturation, may not fully capture the entire spectrum of experiences within the culinary field. Future research could employ a larger sample size to further enhance the richness of data and uncover nuanced challenges. Lastly, the qualitative nature of our research could be complemented by quantitative studies that provide statistical insights into the prevalence and severity of challenges faced by chefs. Combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches may offer a more holistic view of this profession.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Rai, S.M.; Brown, B.D.; Ruwanpura, K.N. SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth–A gendered analysis. *World Dev.* **2019**, *113*, 368–380. [CrossRef]
2. ILO. *Decent Work. Report of the Director General to the 87th Meeting of the International Labour Conference*; International Labour Office: Geneva, Switzerland, 1999; Available online: www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc87/rep-i.htm (accessed on 12 July 2024).
3. Wang, D.; Cheung, C. Decent work in tourism and hospitality—A systematic literature review, classification, and research recommendations. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2024**, *36*, 2194–2213. [CrossRef]
4. UN. Promote Sustained, Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth, Full and Productive Employment and Decent Work for All. 2017. Available online: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8 (accessed on 12 July 2024).
5. Colmekcioglu, N.; Dineva, D.; Lu, X. Building back better: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the resilience of the hospitality and tourism industries. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2022**, *34*, 4103–4122. [CrossRef]
6. Arnesen, E.E. Holistic Sustainability in the Restaurant Industry: Implications of Focusing on the Social Dimension. Master's Thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, Norway, 2018.
7. Giousmpasoglou, C.; Brown, L.; Cooper, J. Alcohol and other drug use in michelin-starred kitchen brigades. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2018**, *70*, 59–65. [CrossRef]
8. Tongchaiprasit, P.; Ariyabuddhiphongs, V. Creativity and turnover intention among hotel chefs: The mediating effects of job satisfaction and job stress. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2016**, *55*, 33–40. [CrossRef]
9. Ravina-Ripoll, R.; Balderas-Cejudo, A.; Núñez-Barriopedro, E.; Galván-Vela, E. Are chefs happiness providers? Exploring the impact of organisational support, intrapreneurship and interactional justice from the perspective of happiness management. *Int. J. Gastron. Food Sci.* **2023**, *34*, 100818. [CrossRef]
10. Giousmpasoglou, C.; Ladkin, A.; Marinakou, E. Worker exploitation in the gig economy: The case of dark kitchens. *J. Hosp. Tour. Insights* **2024**, *7*, 414–435. [CrossRef]
11. Magrizos, S.; Roumpi, D.; Rizomyliotis, I. Talent orchestration and boomerang talent: Seasonally employed chefs' evaluation of talent management practices. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2023**, *35*, 2755–2772. [CrossRef]
12. Nestle New Report Reveals Eight in Ten Chefs Suffer from Poor Mental Health. Available online: https://www.nestle.co.uk/en-gb/media/pressreleases/new-report-reveals-eight-in-ten-chefs-suffer-from-poor-mental-health (accessed on 12 July 2024).
13. The Guardian. The Guardian View on Chefs: Underpaid, Overworked and in Demand. 2021. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/22/the-guardian-view-on-chefs-underpaid-overworked-and-in-demand (accessed on 12 July 2024).
14. Traynor, M.; Cain, L.; Moreo, A. Shooting for the stars: The case of an elite chef. *J. Foodserv. Bus. Res.* **2022**, *25*, 107–125. [CrossRef]
15. Ariza-Montes, A.; Arjona-Fuentes, J.M.; Han, H.; Law, R. The price of success: A study on chefs' subjective well-being, job satisfaction, and human values. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2018**, *69*, 84–93. [CrossRef]
16. Bressan, A.; Duarte Alonso, A.; Kim Vu, O.T.; Tran, L.N.; Tran, T.D. The importance of knowledge management in gastronomy: A chef's future career, the next generations of chefs and trends. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2023**, *35*, 1087–1108. [CrossRef]
17. Filimonau, V.; Chiang, C.; Wang, L.; Muhialdin, B.J.; Ermolaev, V.A. Resourcefulness of chefs and food waste prevention in fine dining restaurants. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2023**, *108*, 103368. [CrossRef]
18. Marinakou, E.; Giousmpasoglou, C. Chefs' competencies: A stakeholder's perspective. *J. Hosp. Tour. Insights* **2022**, *5*, 205–229. [CrossRef]
19. Baldwin, W.; Wong, W.C.W.; Leung, V.T.Y. The transference of cuisine and michelin rated Chinese restaurants: A Chef's perspective of chineseness in Hong Kong. *Int. J. Gastron. Food Sci.* **2023**, *34*, 100817. [CrossRef]
20. Baek, U.; Lee, S.K. Pandemic Dining Dilemmas: Exploring the Determinants of Korean Consumer Dining-Out Behavior during COVID-19. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 8323. [CrossRef]
21. Karatepe, O.M.; Saydam, M.B.; Okumus, F. COVID-19, mental health problems, and their detrimental effects on hotel employees' propensity to be late for work, absenteeism, and life satisfaction. *Curr. Issues Tour.* **2021**, *24*, 934–951. [CrossRef]
22. Cooper, J.; Giousmpasoglou, C.; Marinakou, E. Occupational identity and culture: The case of Michelin-starred chefs. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2017**, *29*, 1362–1379. [CrossRef]
23. Graham, D.; Ali, A.; Tajeddini, K. Open kitchens: Customers' influence on chefs' working practices. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2020**, *45*, 27–36. [CrossRef]
24. Robinson, R.N.; Solnet, D.J.; Breakey, N. A phenomenological approach to hospitality management research: Chefs' occupational commitment. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2014**, *43*, 65–75. [CrossRef]
25. Shrivastav, D. A Job-Readiness Model for Trainee Chefs in Australia. Doctoral Dissertation, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Australia, 2024.

26. Burrow, R.; Smith, J.; Yakinthou, C. 'Yes Chef': Life at the vanguard of culinary excellence. *Work Employ. Soc.* **2015**, *29*, 673–681. [CrossRef]
27. Farmaki, A.; Kladou, S. Why do airbnb hosts discriminate? examining the sources and manifestations of discrimination in host practice. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2020**, *42*, 181–189. [CrossRef]
28. Farmaki, A. Tourism and hospitality internships: A prologue to career intentions? *J. Hosp. Leis. Sport Tour. Educ.* **2018**, *23*, 50–58. [CrossRef]
29. Degirmencioğlu, Z.; Erozan, F.; Saydam, M.B. A mixed-method approach to an English course for students majoring in gastronomy and culinary arts. *J. Hosp. Tour. Educ.* **2023**, 1–11. [CrossRef]
30. Arici, H.E.; Saydam, M.B.; Sökmen, A.; Cakmakoglu Arici, N. Corporate social responsibility in hospitality and tourism: A systematic review. *Serv. Ind. J.* **2024**, 1–30. [CrossRef]
31. Saydam, M.B.; Altun, Ö. An analysis of British Michelin-starred restaurants: Guests' online reviews. *Br. Food J.* **2023**, *125*, 4214–4228. [CrossRef]
32. Saydam, M.B.; Ozturen, A.; Kilic, C. Cultural heritage tourism in North Cyprus: Findings from in-depth interviews with experts. *Worldw. Hosp. Tour. Themes* **2022**, *14*, 349–364. [CrossRef]
33. Chuang, N.; Lei, S.A. Job stress among casino hotel chefs in a top-tier tourism city. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* **2011**, *20*, 551–574. [CrossRef]
34. Malik, S.A.; Akhtar, F.; Raziq, M.M.; Ahmad, M. Measuring service quality perceptions of customers in the hotel industry of pakistan. *Total Qual. Manag. Bus. Excell.* **2020**, *31*, 263–278. [CrossRef]
35. Ariffin AA, M.; Maghzi, A. A preliminary study on customer expectations of hotel hospitality: Influences of personal and hotel factors. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2012**, *31*, 191–198. [CrossRef]
36. Hu, F.; Teichert, T.; Liu, Y.; Li, H.; Gundyreva, E. Evolving customer expectations of hospitality services: Differences in attribute effects on satisfaction and re-patronage. *Tour. Manag.* **2019**, *74*, 345–357. [CrossRef]
37. Lee, W.; Liu, C.; Tseng, T. The multiple effects of service innovation and quality on transitional and electronic word-of-mouth in predicting customer behaviour. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2022**, *64*, 102791. [CrossRef]
38. Ekincek, S.; Günay, S. A recipe for culinary creativity: Defining characteristics of creative chefs and their process. *Int. J. Gastron. Food Sci.* **2023**, *31*, 100633. [CrossRef]
39. Lane, C.; Lup, D. Cooking under fire: Managing multilevel tensions between creativity and innovation in haute cuisine. *Ind. Innov.* **2015**, *22*, 654–676. [CrossRef]
40. Mohanty, P.P.; Tiwari, S.; Balakrishnan Nair, B. Analysing food innovation drivers: Chefs' perspectives. *J. Culin. Sci. Technol.* 2022; *ahead-of-print*. [CrossRef]
41. Lee, C.; Sardeshmukh, S.R.; Hallak, R. A qualitative study of innovation in the restaurant industry. *Anatolia* **2016**, *27*, 367–376. [CrossRef]
42. Wellton, L.; Jonsson, I.M.; Svingstedt, A. "Just trained to be a chef, not a leader": A study of head chef practices. *Int. J. Hosp. Tour. Adm.* **2019**, *20*, 400–422. [CrossRef]
43. Kim, H.-S.; Kim, M.; Koo, D. From teamwork to psychological well-being and job performance: The role of CSR in the workplace. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2022**, *34*, 3764–3789. [CrossRef]
44. Wang, Y.-F. Constructing career competency model of hospitality industry employees for career success. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2013**, *25*, 994–1016. [CrossRef]
45. Seyitoğlu, F. Gastronomy students' internship experience: Benefits, challenges, and future career. *J. Teach. Travel Tour.* **2019**, *19*, 285–301. [CrossRef]
46. Allen, H.; Mac Con Iomaire, M. Secrets of a head chef: Exploring factors influencing success in irish kitchens. *J. Culin. Sci. Technol.* **2017**, *15*, 187–222. [CrossRef]
47. Ivanov, S.; Webster, C. Restaurants and robots: Public preferences for robot food and beverage services. *J. Tour. Futures* **2023**, *9*, 229–239. [CrossRef]
48. Mac Con Iomaire, M.; Afifi, M.F.; Healy, J. Chefs' perspectives of failures in foodservice kitchens, part 1: A phenomenological exploration of the concepts, types, and causes of food production failure. *J. Foodserv. Bus. Res.* **2021**, *24*, 177–214. [CrossRef]
49. Saydam, M.B.; Arici, H.E.; Koseoglu, M.A. How does the tourism and hospitality industry use artificial intelligence? A review of empirical studies and future research agenda. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* **2022**, *31*, 908–936. [CrossRef]
50. Park, S.; Lehto, X. Automated, human, or semi-automated service in restaurants? an investigation of technology-enabled service designs and customer attribution. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2022**, *104*, 103217. [CrossRef]
51. Fraser, S.; Lyon, P. Chef perceptions of modernist equipment and techniques in the kitchen. *J. Culin. Sci. Technol.* **2018**, *16*, 88–105. [CrossRef]