December 2021

The Impact of COVID-19 on Restaurant Workers

Diego Bufquin
*University of Central Florida*, Diego.Bufquin@ucf.edu

Jeong-Yeol Park
*University of Central Florida*, Jeong-Yeol.Park@ucf.edu

Robin Back
*University of Central Florida*, robin.back@ucf.edu

Part of the Diseases Commons, Food and Beverage Management Commons, Human Resources Management Commons, and the Public Health Commons

Find similar works at: [https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rosen-research-review](https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rosen-research-review)

University of Central Florida Libraries [http://library.ucf.edu](http://library.ucf.edu)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rosen Research Review by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

**Recommended Citation**
Available at: [https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rosen-research-review/vol2/iss3/2](https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rosen-research-review/vol2/iss3/2)
The COVID-19 pandemic has hit many business sectors hard, none more so than the hospitality industry. Restaurant employees were already known to report high levels of depression and anxiety, as well as alcohol and drug use. How has the pandemic contributed to these problems? In the first study of its kind, Dr. Diego Bufquin, Dr. Jeong-Yeol Park and Dr. Robin Back from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, along with two collaborators, examine the relationships between restaurant employees’ work status, mental health, substance use, and career turnover intentions during the pandemic.

In addition to millions of lives lost, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on businesses worldwide. The hospitality industry has been one of the hardest hit. In 2020, when restaurants and foodservice establishments had to close or be restricted to take-out, pick-up or delivery only, the National Restaurant Association reported that two-thirds of US restaurant foodservice establishments had to close or possibly more stressful circumstances, not least through the risk of exposure to the virus. We know from the National Institute of Mental Health that one in five Americans live with a mental illness. A recent study found that 80% of hospitality employees believe that mental health issues, for example feeling depressed, anxious or manic, represent a major challenge for the industry. In addition, alcohol and substance use—both of which are known to be a problem in the industry—can be linked to mental health issues. It is also known that high alcohol and substance use can contribute to career dissatisfaction and career turnover.

Restaurant employees’ work status, mental health, substance use, and career turnover intentions during the pandemic. The research has been conducted by Dr. Diego Bufquin, Dr. Jeong-Yeol Park and Dr. Robin Back.

Expectations and hypotheses

A literature review conducted at the beginning of the study informed the 12 hypotheses that Bufquin, Park and Back subsequently investigated. The review identified two markers of mental health: psychological wellbeing and psychological distress. The researchers hypothesized that these would both be affected by work status: that is, whether someone is working, furloughed, or has been laid off.

Two-thirds of U.S. restaurant workers—8 million people—lost their jobs through being furloughed or laid-off.

The study took a two-stage approach to analysis. The validity of the constructs was first tested and confirmed using the multivariate procedure of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Structural equation modelling (SEM) was then used to analyse the relationships between the variables measured. SEM is a set of statistical procedures which capture the causal relationships between variables. SEM enables the quantification of behaviour and also accounts for errors in measurement.

Intriguing results

Of the 12 hypotheses identified for Bufquin, Park and Back’s study, three were supported, three were partially supported, and six were not supported. The results indicate that there is no significant influence of work status on psychological wellbeing, though there is some influence of work status on psychological distress. Employees who continued to work through the pandemic reported a significantly higher degree of psychological distress compared with those who were furloughed.
Employees’ work status was hypothesized to have a significant effect on participants’ use of drugs and alcohol. The results from the study showed that although working employees had a higher tendency to use both drugs and alcohol compared with furloughed staff, there was no significant influence found for laid-off staff when compared with furloughed staff. Regarding the link between mental health and drug and alcohol use, although the original hypothesis was that psychological wellbeing would decrease drug and alcohol use, the results suggest the opposite. However, it was confirmed that psychological distress significantly increased both drug and alcohol use. The results did not as had been anticipated, indicate that career turnover intentions are influenced by drug use, though alcohol use did significantly decrease career turnover intentions. In addition, psychological distress and psychological wellbeing were both found to increase career turnover intentions.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? Given that several of the study’s hypotheses were not supported by the results, COVID-19 appears to have changed the way employees think about work—or the lack of it—and the effect that it has on people’s lives.

Bufquin, Park and Back commented: “Results of this study revealed that work status affects employees’ mental health differently during a pandemic than previously reported in studies conducted prior to the pandemic. More specifically, the current study revealed that employees who were still working during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced higher levels of psychological distress, drug use, and alcohol use than those who had been furloughed. Furthermore, the current study also revealed that psychological wellbeing increases drug and alcohol use, thereby contradicting previous studies.” The researchers suggest that higher levels of drug and alcohol use and psychological distress experienced by employees who worked during the pandemic could be explained by increasingly stressful working conditions. Employees were required to adapt quickly to challenging new working conditions, and also risked exposure to the virus. A fall in the number of customers also resulted in reduced income, due to the loss of gratuities on which many restaurant workers depend.

While the study did not confirm an association between unemployment and lower psychological wellbeing, the Rosen College research team suggests this might be as a result of the benefits and tax credits that furloughed and laid-off workers received. As a result they were perhaps not as worried about money as their employed former colleagues.

The researchers argue that the fact that a positive link was found between psychological wellbeing and drug and alcohol use could be explained by people having more time on their hands during the pandemic. Increased alcohol sales and alcohol consumption have generally been observed during the pandemic. Other reports have suggested there has been a general increase in substance use, particularly among younger adults, racial/ethnic minorities and essential workers.

MANAGING EMPLOYEES DURING THE PANDEMIC Bufquin, Park and Back’s study fills a significant gap in the literature and suggests practical ways in which restauranters might improve the lives of their employees. They find that restaurant businesses should do more to consider the stresses and strains experienced by employees, and also to prioritize their wellbeing. In particular, they should adopt strategies to mitigate the risks to which employees are exposed, both physically and financially.

For example, partially furloughing employees and having more people working part-time would allow employees to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus, give them more time to recover from the additional strains of working in the pandemic, and allow them to access some unemployment benefits. Restaurant businesses should also coach staff in how to deal with stress, and inform them about external sources of support. In addition, restaurant businesses should consider the impact on employees of having a reduced income because of reduced gratuities.

Dr. Diego Bufquin has a multicultural background that has led him to live and work in a variety of countries. In the hospitality industry, Dr. Bufquin has had the opportunity to work at several hotels and restaurants. His research mostly focuses on the areas of consumer and organizational behavior.

Dr. Jeong-Yeol Park has conducted multiple research studies that have examined potential travellers’ purchase behaviour at online travel agencies, restaurant customers’ behaviour, and demand analysis for hospitality industries. Currently, he teaches Hospitality Industry Financial Accounting and Research Methods in Hospitality and Tourism.

Dr. Robin Back has over 25 years of experience in the retail, travel and tourism, and alcoholic beverage industries on three continents. His research is mainly focused on consumer behavior and marketing, with a primary interest in the business of wine. He teaches a number of beverage-related courses at both graduate and undergraduate level.

Dr. Robin Back
T: +1 407.903.8207
W: https://hospitality.ucf.edu/person/robin-back/

Dr. Jeong-Yeol Park
T: +1 407.903.8207
W: https://hospitality.ucf.edu/person/jeong-yeol-park/

Dr. Diego Bufquin
T: +1 407.903.8209
W: https://hospitality.ucf.edu/person/diego-bufquin/