

Research article

If I can't do it, you can't do it: Crab mentality in hotel kitchens

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of young chefs in hotel kitchens regarding the crab-bucket syndrome (CBS) and explores how competition, hierarchy, and perceptions of justice shape workplace dynamics in the tourism sector. Adopting a constructivist paradigm, a qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 young chefs and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis with the support of MAXQDA 24. The findings reveal that CBS is not limited to individual jealousy but emerges as an organizationally embedded phenomenon reinforced by hierarchical structures, knowledge withholding, organizational silence, and perceived injustice. Although participants reported high self-efficacy, they experienced constraints in demonstrating their capabilities due to limited meritocracy and restricted knowledge sharing. Collaboration increased during peak workloads but shifted towards opportunistic competition under less pressure. The study highlights the negative effects of CBS on motivation, career development, and employee retention. It suggests that fair promotion systems, mentorship, knowledge-sharing practices, and open communication channels are critical for mitigating these effects. By conceptualizing CBS as a systemic organizational issue, this study contributes a nuanced perspective to tourism and hospitality management literature.

KEYWORDS

Hospitality industry;
crab-bucket syndrome;
workplace dynamics;
qualitative thematic
analysis

Introduction

The service industry is a field in which the human element is decisive; therefore, the quality of working relationships directly affects the quality of the service provided. In this context, interactions among employees play a critical role in the sustainability and efficiency of the sector. However, competition emerging in the workplace can sometimes negatively affect employees' motivation and service quality. In highly competitive environments, different perceptions, conflicts, and psychosocial problems may develop among individuals. One of these negative phenomena is the crab bucket syndrome (CBS). Crab bucket syndrome is defined as the tendency of individuals to hinder the efforts of others who are trying to succeed instead of supporting them (Üzüm & Özkan, 2023). The concept is based on the metaphor of crabs pulling each other down when one tries to escape from a bucket. In this respect, the syndrome can be considered not only a competitive behavioral pattern but also a sociological and psychological reflection. Indeed, Freud's (1915) theory of repression suggests that individuals push feelings and drives they cannot accept into the unconscious, while Jung's (1959) concept of the shadow archetype states that the dark aspects of the self that a person avoids confronting may be reflected in reactions to others' achievements or attempts to advance. Thus, when a person observes in others a desire or accomplishment that they have suppressed or failed to realize themselves, they often tend to criticize, judge, or obstruct. This can also be interpreted as a reaction arising from confrontation with one's own repressed aspects. Hotel kitchens in the tourism sector are environments where heavy workload, strict hierarchical structure, and constant performance pressure shape employees' psychosocial experiences (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Karatepe & Uludağ, 2007). Especially

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HOW TO CITE: Öztürk, İ. (2026). If I can't do it, you can't do it: Crab mentality in hotel kitchens. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 15(1), 242-252. <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.734>

ISSN: 2223-814X (Online) | © 2026 AJHTL



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young chefs at the early stages of their careers, while still trying to build their professional identity, may encounter power relations, status struggles, and perceptions of organizational injustice. Due to their inexperience and efforts to hold on to the sector, young employees become more open both to needing support and to the negative effects of competition (Pratten & O'Leary, 2007). Moreover, the negative experiences faced by young professionals at the beginning of their careers can deeply affect their intention to leave the sector (Safavi & Karatepe, 2018), their professional commitment (Walsh & Taylor, 2007), and their motivation to provide quality service. Therefore, understanding how crab bucket syndrome is experienced among young chefs is critical not only for individual well-being but also for the employee retention and sustainability strategies of the sector. A review of the current literature shows that studies on crab bucket syndrome are limited. However, this limitation is not only numerical but also methodological, theoretical, and contextual. First, from a methodological perspective, most existing studies are based on quantitative surveys or cross-sectional empirical tests (Üzüm & Özkan, 2023; Çetiner et al., 2023; Üzüm et al., 2024). This prevents the deep psychosocial dimensions of the syndrome—such as emotional intensity, power dynamics, and relational ruptures—from becoming visible enough. Qualitative interview-based studies are extremely scarce, and there is a clear lack of studies that deeply analyses participants' narratives. Second, from a theoretical perspective, existing research generally handles crab bucket syndrome in a limited way, focusing on jealousy, sabotaging behaviors, or competition; but it has not yet developed a comprehensive framework that integrates the phenomenon with deeper psychosocial theories such as organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), the self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1988), and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Therefore, the motivational and emotional mechanisms underlying the syndrome remain unclear. Third, from a contextual perspective, studies exploring how crab bucket syndrome manifests in tourism settings — especially hotel kitchens, which are characterized by heavy workloads and hierarchical status struggles — are very limited (Ok & Topaloğlu, 2024). This gap is particularly critical in understanding the motivation, professional development, and retention intentions of young chefs at the beginning of their careers. Therefore, this research aims to address a methodological gap (by replacing predominantly quantitative and surface-level approaches with in-depth qualitative analysis), a theoretical gap (by linking crab bucket syndrome to well-established models such as organizational silence and social comparison theory), and a contextual gap (by focusing on the tourism sector and young chefs). In this way, the study seeks to understand the experiences of young kitchen employees regarding crab bucket syndrome across emotional, relational, and organizational dimensions and to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to this field.

Conceptual framework

Crab bucket syndrome

The term “crab bucket syndrome” (CBS) is used to describe a selfish and narrow-minded mindset summarised by the phrase “if I can't do it, you can't do it either.” It refers to individuals who, instead of supporting the advancement of others or allowing them to pursue their aspirations, belittle or attempt to pull them down (Soubhari & Kumar, 2014; Sampath, 1997). CBS is derived from a metaphor based on the observation of a fisherman catching crabs and placing them into a basket or barrel (Üzüm et al., 2022). This metaphor likens the behaviour of crabs in an open basket pulling back any crab that tries to escape, resulting in all of them remaining trapped together (Sayan & Altuntaş, 2024). While this behaviour is an instinctive reflex observed in crabs in nature, its manifestation among humans is associated with certain social norms and cultural conventions. In this sense, informal norms such as mild rivalry or destructive workplace rules can create a climate where individuals develop obstructive attitudes rather than supporting each other's success (Fettahlioğlu & Alkış Dedeoğlu, 2021). Individuals with a crab mentality do not appreciate the success of others; instead, they desire those individuals to fail as well. This attitude often manifests itself through jealousy, discouragement, undermining others' efforts, and overly competitive behavior (Çavuş & Sarpkaya, 2021). In the workplace, it is common for employees to experience rudeness or disrespect from colleagues, subordinates, or supervisors. Such experiences can be particularly harmful for individuals with marginalized or stigmatized identities, leading to adverse outcomes such as limited career development opportunities or hindered upward mobility (Miller, 2019). Theoretical perspectives suggest that these actions are often driven by a fear of losing status or resources, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of difficulty (Ayдын & Oğuzhan, 2019). For instance, Miller (2019) emphasize that organizational culture can either encourage or prevent the “crabs in the barrel” phenomenon. CBS tends to occur more frequently in environments where collaboration culture and perceptions of fairness are weak, resulting in declining trust, a toxic organisational climate, and reduced performance. These findings align with Morrison & Milliken's (2000) concept of organizational silence, which posits that in organizations with low trust and weak perceptions of justice, employees not only block each other's progress but also refrain from voicing concerns, thereby limiting

organizational development. Similarly, Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model explains that social comparisons may lead individuals to perceive others' achievements as threats, prompting sabotage or obstructive behaviors. Supporting this, Forouzande et al. (2023) found that crab mentality has a direct, negative, and significant impact on employees' job success and happiness. Furthermore, the study revealed an indirect, negative, and significant effect on success and happiness through increased turnover intention. Employee behaviour in kitchen settings is influenced by organizational and environmental conditions, suggesting that workplace dynamics play a key role (Booyesen et al., 2021).

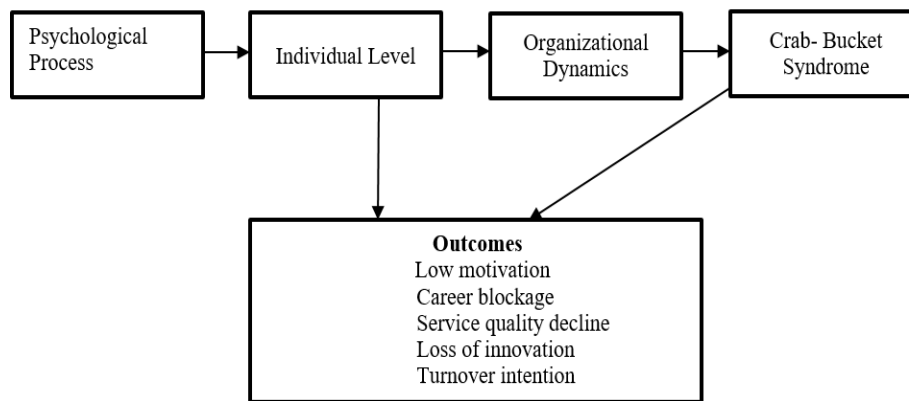


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: Prepared by the author

The conceptual framework of this study explains how hotel kitchen employees experience organizational targets related to crab bucket syndrome (CBS) and the underlying reasons behind these experiences. CBS may trigger reactions such as frustration, emotional distress, and loss of hope when employees perceive in-group conflict with similar peers. In competitive environments, individuals striving for career advancement may feel pressured to match or exceed their colleagues' performance. These dynamics highlight how workplace interactions and perceived rivalries shape employees' emotional and professional responses. Accordingly, this study seeks to understand employees' perceptions of CBS within this conceptual framework.

Literature review

Crab bucket syndrome (CBS) refers to the attitudes and behaviors of individuals who, instead of supporting others' success, attempt to hinder their advancement (Soubhari & Kumar, 2014). Although the concept has mostly been associated with jealousy, sabotage, and extreme competitiveness within organizational contexts (Çavuş & Sarpkaya, 2021), recently it has also been discussed in relation to broader theoretical frameworks such as workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), toxic leadership (Pelletier, 2010), organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). However, these connections have not yet been adequately examined in the fields of tourism and gastronomy. A significant portion of existing studies has been conducted in sectors such as education (Çavuş & Sarpkaya, 2021), healthcare (Sayan & Altuntaş, 2024), and public administration (Miller, 2019; Altıntaş & Topçu, 2024). In the tourism context, research remains limited. For example, Ok & Topaloğlu (2024) examined employees' perceptions of CBS in food and beverage enterprises; Çetiner et al. (2023) explored how the syndrome is associated with destructive behaviors among managers in accommodation businesses; and Üzümlü and Özkan (2023) demonstrated its negative impact on organizational commitment in the private sector. These findings indicate that CBS plays a destructive role in shaping organizational climate, job satisfaction, and motivation across various industries. In the international literature, similar concepts have been widely discussed, especially in the fields of organizational behavior and human resource management. Andersson and Pearson (1999) analysed how workplace incivility erodes employee relationships; Ayar (2023) emphasized CBS as a dynamic that hinders organizational progress. Studies in the tourism field (Johns & Menzel, 1999; Murray-Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007; Fine, 2008; Harris & Giuffre, 2015; Robinson & Barron, 2017) have shown that kitchen environments—with their heavy workloads, hierarchical structures, and stressful conditions—provide fertile ground for toxic behaviors. However, these studies have not explicitly addressed the CBS concept; instead, they have largely focused on evaluating kitchen working conditions.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of young chefs in hotel kitchens regarding crab bucket syndrome (CBS). It adopts a constructivist ontology, viewing social reality as multiple and subjectively constructed, and an interpretivist epistemology that emphasizes the socially produced nature of knowledge. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of 12 questions, adapted from Altıntaş & Topçu (2024) and tailored to the tourism context. A purposeful sampling strategy with maximum variation was used to ensure diversity across kitchen sections, seniority levels, and gender. The sample included 30 young chefs (16 males, 14 females) aged 20–32. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis with the support of MAXQDA 24. To ensure confidentiality, participants were coded as K01–K30. This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of CBS as a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by individual, relational, and organizational dynamics.

Tables 1: Participant Profile

No	Age	Gender	Department
K1	20	Male	Cold Kitchen
K2	23	Female	Pastry
K3	24	Male	Hot Kitchen
K4	22	Female	Cold Kitchen
K5	21	Male	Grill
K6	20	Female	Pastry
K7	24	Male	Vegetable Preparation
K8	21	Female	Hot Kitchen
K9	23	Male	Cold Kitchen
K10	20	Female	Pastry
K11	24	Male	Grill
K12	19	Female	Vegetable Preparation
K13	22	Male	Hot Kitchen
K14	21	Female	Pastry
K15	24	Male	Cold Kitchen
K16	19	Female	Hot Kitchen
K17	21	Male	Grill
K18	24	Female	Pastry
K19	23	Male	Vegetable Preparation
K20	20	Female	Cold Kitchen
K21	22	Male	Pastry
K22	20	Female	Hot Kitchen
K23	22	Male	Grill
K24	20	Female	Cold Kitchen
K25	22	Male	Vegetable Preparation
K26	24	Female	Pastry
K27	23	Male	Hot Kitchen
K28	22	Female	Grill
K29	21	Male	Cold Kitchen
K30	19	Female	Pastry

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to explore the individual, relational, and organizational dimensions of crab bucket syndrome (CBS). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, which lasted approximately 20–35 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, following six phases: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting.

Table-2: Audit trail for code revisions

Code ID	Initial Assignment	Revision Decision	Rationale / Notes
C05	Motivation	Repositioned → Individual Competence	Participants emphasized a lack of personal skills rather than general motivation.
C12	Organizational Conflict	Split → a) Communication Deficiency b) Status Games	The original code was too broad and was divided into two more precise subthemes.
C21	Risk Perception	Deleted	Removed because it was supported by very few quotations and lacked analytical depth.
C28	Professional Identity	Merged → Status and Performance	Participants' statements overlapped significantly; codes were consolidated under a broader theme.
C33	Lack of Organizational Support	Renamed → Structural Support Deficiency	Adopted more inclusive and academically precise terminology.

To ensure transparency, a detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the coding process. Initial codes, revisions, and their underlying rationales were systematically documented. For instance, "Organizational Conflict" was later divided into "Communication Deficiency" and "Status Games" to reflect diverse participant meanings. Similarly, "Motivation" was reclassified under "Individual Competence," as participants emphasized skill gaps rather than general motivation. The code "Risk Perception" was removed due to limited supporting data. This process enhanced the conceptual coherence of the analysis and clarified the development of the final themes.

Thematic analysis and findings

The first phase of thematic analysis—familiarization—began with a systematic reading of interview transcripts to identify meaningful elements. During this stage, participants' narratives were reviewed in relation to the research questions, with key sections highlighted and annotated. This process enabled deep engagement with the data and facilitated the identification of initial theme candidates. Findings indicate that crab bucket syndrome (CBS) among young chefs is multi-layered. Although participants perceived themselves as professionally competent, hierarchical structures and resistance to innovation limited their ability to demonstrate these competencies, creating an individual competence paradox. Previous research suggests that rigid hierarchies suppress creativity and innovation (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). As one participant noted, "I improved myself through education, but they are not very open to innovation in the kitchen" (K1). A lack of meritocracy further undermined perceptions of fairness, as promotions and task allocation were often based on personal connections rather than competence. "Those with connections rise very quickly, and this damages our sense of fairness" (K5). Such conditions weaken trust and encourage destructive competition (Colquitt et al., 2013). In these environments, employees may perceive others' success as a threat and engage in fault-finding or sabotage, consistent with Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model. Knowledge hiding also emerged as a key theme. Experienced employees restricted access to information to maintain power, as reflected in statements such as "They don't share recipes; sometimes they even give wrong information" (K6) and "There is jealousy towards interns; they don't want us to learn" (K13). These findings align with Connelly et al. (2012). Additionally, participants reported that their ideas were often ignored, reflecting organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Solidarity was found to be conditional—strong during peak workloads but replaced by opportunistic competition under lower pressure. For example, "When it was busy, everyone helped each other, but when things slowed down, people started to capitalize on mistakes" (K9). Employees also engaged in impression management and status games, as illustrated by "When the chefs arrive, suddenly everyone speeds up; normally they don't work that fast" (K21), reinforcing competitive and low-trust dynamics. The findings of this study were systematically structured under six main themes based on participants' statements. These themes are identified as individual competency paradox, systemic injustice and destructive competitive culture, knowledge hoarding syndrome and the "you can't do it" mentality, organizational voice constraints, conditional solidarity and opportunistic competition, and duplicitous performances and status games. Together, these themes reveal how employees' individual skills, motivations, and professional competencies are shaped—and often constrained—by organizational structures, managerial practices, and workplace culture. Through the integration of sub-themes and code categories, the results provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between individual capabilities and organizational dynamics.

Main theme 1: Individual competency paradox

Participants reported a high sense of professional self-efficacy gained through formal education and hands-on practice; however, they also emphasized that organizational dynamics restrict their ability to showcase these competencies. For instance, one chef stated, "*I improved myself through education, but there is a hierarchy in the kitchen that is closed to innovation.*" This reflects a situation where creative potential is suppressed by hierarchical resistance and senior staff's fear of innovation. The pattern aligns with Jung's shadow archetype, suggesting that senior employees may struggle to tolerate the creativity they have repressed within themselves, thus hindering young talents from fully demonstrating their potential.

Sub-theme 1: Professional self-perception and performance

Most participants expressed a strong and positive self-perception regarding their professional competencies: "*I consider myself quite competent in my job because I had the opportunity to improve myself both through education and in practice.*" (S1-K1). "*I find myself adequate for my position. I am particularly good at knife skills, hygiene standards, and time management.*" (S1-K2). These findings indicate that young chefs have developed solid professional self-confidence. This confidence is not solely a result of social desirability bias but also reflects the technical skill requirements of the culinary profession. However, the study shows that workplace dynamics limit the expression of this competence, keeping it from fully translating into visible professional performance.

Sub-theme 2: Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation

In contrast to their positive self-perception, participants encountered systemic barriers that prevented them from showcasing their abilities. These obstacles were primarily linked to hierarchical structures and the resistance of upper management to innovation: "*There are some restrictions when it comes to showing my skills; sometimes the chefs can be resistant to innovation.*" (S1-K1). "*I rarely find opportunities to express*

my creativity; most of the time, we are limited to completing assigned tasks." (S1-K2). Such barriers stem from organizational hierarchy and managerial approaches. As a reflection of the crab bucket syndrome, senior staff display resistance to innovation and limit the potential of subordinates. This pattern aligns with Jung's shadow archetype, which explains how individuals may suppress creativity in others when it reflects their own repressed potential.

Main theme 2: Systemic injustice and destructive competitive culture

This theme captures the most prominent organizational-level manifestations of the crab bucket syndrome (CBS). Participants reported that the sense of fairness in their kitchens was undermined, and competition — which could serve as a healthy source of motivation — often became toxic and destructive. The findings indicate that CBS is not merely a set of individual behaviors but rather a systemically embedded dynamic, institutionalized through organizational culture and management practices that shape interpersonal relationships. When perceptions of justice deteriorate, competition shifts from a constructive framework to one characterized by sabotage and opportunism.

Sub-theme 1: Systemic injustice

The most striking indicator of injustice was the dominance of personal connections over merit in promotions and task assignments. Participants described how favoritism directly undermined trust and intensified rivalry: *"I noticed that fairness was not always upheld, especially in promotion processes. Employees with connections seemed to rise faster."* (S5-K1). *"In my observations, there were cases where managers were not impartial. This damaged our sense of justice."* (S5-K29). *"It was very clear that personal relationships played a role in hiring decisions, which created doubts about meritocracy."* (S5-K16). This systemic injustice is a critical finding within the theoretical framework of CBS. The erosion of meritocracy pushes employees into cutthroat competition, transforming rivalry from a healthy driver of performance into a culture fed by sabotage and opportunism. In environments where fairness is perceived as low, employees block one another's progress and avoid voicing existing problems, reinforcing organizational silence and stagnation.

Sub-theme 2: Destructive competition and sabotage

Participants observed that constructive competition was often replaced by toxic, destructive patterns that harmed collaboration and trust: *"There was competition in the workplace, but it was rarely constructive—people were mostly looking for each other's mistakes instead of helping."* (S5-K2). *"Some employees badmouthed others for their own benefit, which made the work environment tense."* (S5-K20). These findings align with Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model, which explains how individuals, motivated to protect their own status, perceive others' success as threatening and engage in sabotaging behaviors. This reflects the crab bucket metaphor precisely: when one individual attempts to rise, others pull them back down, preventing upward mobility and reinforcing a zero-sum competitive culture.

Main theme 3: Knowledge hoarding syndrome — "you can't do it" mentality

This theme reflects a key manifestation of crab bucket syndrome (CBS), where experienced employees withhold knowledge and discourage younger staff to limit their development. The findings show that power relations restrict knowledge flow in kitchen environments, weakening learning processes. This behaviour can be interpreted through Freud's theory of repression, suggesting that individuals who missed past opportunities may unconsciously hinder others' progress. Discouraging statements such as "You can't do it" emerge as a mechanism that undermines motivation and slows organizational learning.

Sub-theme 1: Knowledge monopolization and mentor resistance

Withholding professional expertise and resisting knowledge sharing emerged as a clear embodiment of CBS behavior. Participants' statements vividly reflect this dynamic: *"Some employees try to push others back to highlight themselves. They don't share what they know."* (S6-K1). *"The idea of 'if I can't do it, neither can you' was common among some senior chefs. They especially refused to share their special recipes."* (S6-K9). *"Some people even give wrong information to block others from developing. This causes a waste of time."* (S6-K6). Experienced staff who missed their own development opportunities in the past appear to repress this frustration and project it onto younger employees by restricting access to expertise. Knowledge becomes a strategic source of power, deliberately controlled through hierarchical relationships. This dynamic not only limits the growth of newcomers but also reinforces status boundaries in the workplace.

Sub-theme 2: Success envy and social deterioration

Beyond withholding information, discouraging verbal messages directed at younger staff forms another powerful dimension of this syndrome. Participants frequently reported that their efforts to learn were belittled, undermining their motivation: *“When I wanted to learn, I was told things like ‘you can’t do it.’ It hurt, but I insisted on improving myself.”* (S6-K4). *“Yes, there is jealousy, especially towards interns. They are blocked so they can’t learn more.”* (S6-K13). These findings clearly reveal the psychological dimension of CBS. The “You can’t do it” mentality functions as a pressuring mechanism that leaves a lasting mark on young employees’ professional identities. Such attitudes not only erode individual self-confidence but also systematically hinder organizational learning and knowledge transfer, ultimately weakening the long-term innovative potential of the workplace.

Main theme 4: Organizational voice constraints

Participants reported that their ideas were often not considered in decision-making processes and that they were mostly positioned as passive executors of orders. While teamwork was sometimes encouraged for operational efficiency, innovative ideas were not equally supported and were even perceived as threats in some cases. This contradiction limits employees’ potential for creativity and participation.

Sub-theme 1: Limited voice

Employees’ level of voice in organizational processes aligns with Morrison & Milliken’s (2000) concept of organizational silence: *“Although our ideas were asked, they were generally not considered in practice.”* (S7-K1). *“I observed that our thoughts were not valued much. Most of the time, we just follow orders.”* (S7-K4). *“There was no environment created for us to share our ideas. We were mainly expected to complete the tasks assigned.”* (S7-K17). These findings reveal the rigid hierarchical structure that suppresses employees’ creative contributions. In this context, the crab bucket syndrome is linked to the tendency of senior staff to perceive subordinates’ ideas as potential threats, thereby pushing them into silence and limiting their participation.

Sub-theme 2: Support for teamwork

However, some participants noted the presence of organizational support when it came to teamwork: *“Work in the kitchen doesn’t function without team spirit. Managers know this, so collaboration is encouraged.”* (S7-K2). *“Especially the head chefs often said the kitchen is a whole, which strengthened the sense of teamwork.”* (S7-K8). This contradictory pattern suggests that organizational support is selective and situational. While teamwork is promoted as an operational necessity, individual creativity and innovative ideas are not supported to the same extent. Such selective support reinforces a culture of silence, restricting employees’ potential for participation and innovation.

Main theme 5: Conditional solidarity and opportunistic competition

This theme highlights the dual nature of workplace relationships and how they shift depending on situational factors. Participants described an environment where strong cooperation and support coexist with opportunistic and competitive behaviors. This dynamic reflects the complex structure of professional kitchens, which simultaneously require teamwork and remain vulnerable to conflicts of interest.

Sub-theme 1: Culture of mutual assistance

A positive culture of mutual assistance was observed as one dimension of workplace relationships: *“Helping each other was common. Especially on busy days, everyone supported one another.”* (S8-K2). *“In my team, helping each other was very common. When we couldn’t finish the food on time, everyone collaborated to find a solution.”* (S8-K4). *“When there was no helping each other, it was impossible to keep up with the work. Therefore, inevitably, solidarity increased.”* (S8-K25). These findings indicate that teamwork is both an operational necessity and, at times, a form of genuine interpersonal support. The kitchen environment, by its very nature, demands collaboration to maintain efficiency and meet time-sensitive demands.

Sub-theme 2: Opportunistic competition

However, the same environment can also foster competitive and opportunistic attitudes when circumstances change: *“There was helpfulness at the hotel where I worked, but some people tried to highlight others’ mistakes to impress managers.”* (S8-K1). *“Helping each other increased when work was busy, but when things calmed down, small conflicts started to appear.”* (S8-K9). These findings clearly show the conditional nature of solidarity within the crab bucket syndrome dynamic. Employees may abandon cooperation when personal gain is at stake, adopting competitive or undermining behaviors instead. This aligns with social

comparison theory, which suggests that individuals strategically adjust their behavior based on the pursuit of status and advantage.

Main theme 6: Duplicitous performances and status games

This theme addresses the strategic behavior employees display in front of upper management and the ethical implications of these actions. Participants reported that ingratiation and performance manipulation were common in professional kitchens, undermining organizational trust and reinforcing perceived unfairness.

Sub-theme 1: Strategic ingratiation

Behaviors aimed at gaining favor from upper management emerged as a prominent indicator of the crab bucket syndrome: *“Yes, I noticed that some employees behaved differently, especially when the head chefs were around. Normally they worked slowly, but when a chef or manager came, they sped up and smiled more.”* (S10-K1). *“Some employees were constantly serving coffee or tea to the managers. It seemed like they wanted to serve them beyond their regular duties—I think it was a way to curry favor.”* (S10-K21). *“I sometimes witnessed this kind of behavior. For example, some employees didn't follow the rules when managers weren't present, but the moment a chef came, they suddenly worked meticulously.”* (S10-K9). These performance games can be seen as behaviors that erode organizational trust and reinforce perceptions of injustice. The practice of applying double standards reflects the self-interest-driven dimension of the crab bucket syndrome.

Sub-theme 2: Social sabotage

Another key aspect of this theme is sabotaging colleagues to strengthen one's own position: *“I once witnessed an employee exaggerating another colleague's mistake to the management. The situation wasn't that serious, but they did it to make their colleague look bad in front of the boss.”* (S10-K19). *“Yes, things like this happened. Sometimes small mistakes were ignored, but when it suited them, people misrepresented the facts to managers to protect themselves.”* (S10-K14). These behaviors reveal the destructive nature of zero-sum power games, where individuals seek personal advantage by capitalizing on others' failures. Such actions are a core characteristic of the crab bucket syndrome and deeply undermine organizational trust.

Discussion

This study sheds light on the multi-layered consequences of competition, hierarchy, and perceived justice in the tourism sector by exploring the experiences of young chefs with the crab bucket syndrome (CBS) in hotel kitchens. The findings indicate that although most young employees possess a high sense of professional self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), their opportunities to demonstrate these competencies are constrained by rigid organizational hierarchies and a culture resistant to innovation. This finding is consistent with the organizational silence literature (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) and Detert & Edmondson's (2011) concept of implicit voice theories, which suggest that when employees perceive risks associated with speaking up, their motivation to contribute diminishes. Similarly, the absence of high-quality relationships, as highlighted by Carmeli & Gittell (2009), explains the decline in learning and creativity and the avoidance of risk-taking behaviors among young chefs. Another important finding is that the erosion of organizational justice transforms CBS into an institutionalized dynamic. Favoritism and the prioritization of personal relationships over merit in promotions and task allocation shift competition from a constructive to a destructive form, thereby undermining trust. This finding aligns with Greenberg's (1990) and Cropanzano et al.'s (2007) models of organizational justice, as well as Colquitt et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis linking perceived injustice to counterproductive work behaviors and reduced organizational commitment. Furthermore, Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model and Kim & Glomb's (2014) findings on envy-driven sabotage provide a psychological explanation for these dynamics. The study also reveals that knowledge hiding has evolved into a strategic power mechanism within kitchen culture. Experienced employees often withhold or distort information to maintain their position, supporting Connelly et al.'s (2012) typology of knowledge hiding and Serenko & Bontis's (2016) findings on its negative impact on innovation. Likewise, Černe et al. (2014) demonstrate that knowledge hiding diminishes creativity, which is consistent with the monopolization of knowledge observed in this study. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud's (1915) theory of repression and Jung's (1959) concept of the shadow archetype suggest that such behaviors may function as unconscious defense mechanisms among individuals who perceive missed opportunities in their own careers. Moreover, the findings highlight the conditional nature of solidarity in professional kitchens. While cooperation increases during periods of high workload, opportunistic and exclusionary behaviors emerge when pressure decreases. This pattern supports Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory and Duffy et al.'s (2012) findings on the role of envy in weakening collaboration.

Additionally, the presence of political behaviors and impression management in front of upper management suggests that performance evaluation processes are often shaped by visibility rather than genuine collaboration. From a broader tourism perspective, the findings indicate that these negative early-career experiences weaken young employees' intention to remain in the sector. This is consistent with Richardson's (2010) emphasis on the fragility of career perceptions among young tourism professionals and Deery's (2008) argument that talent retention depends on fairness and working conditions. Similarly, Baum (2019) highlights the importance of sustainable human resource practices in tourism, and the present findings suggest that structural injustice and destructive competition constitute critical barriers to workforce sustainability. The hierarchical nature of kitchen environments further reinforces these dynamics, making them particularly susceptible to CBS.

Theoretical and practical contributions

This research makes significant conceptual and methodological contributions to the CBS literature. While existing studies largely rely on quantitative, surface-level measurements, this study uses thematic analysis to deeply examine young chefs' lived experiences and reveal the individual, relational, and organizational layers of CBS. Furthermore, it extends the conceptualization of CBS beyond jealousy and sabotage by integrating it with established frameworks such as organizational silence, self-evaluation maintenance, social comparison theory, and political behavior. It also addresses implicit voice beliefs and knowledge hiding and their impact on creativity and innovation, positioning CBS as a multi-dimensional dynamic fueled by organizational structures and power relations rather than merely an individual behavioral tendency. For human resource management in tourism, the findings offer critical insights. Unless justice and merit-based career paths are reinforced in hotel kitchens, young talents risk losing motivation and may leave the industry, exacerbating high turnover rates, which have costly implications for service quality. Employers can strengthen both employee engagement and innovative capacity by providing mentorship programmes, fair promotion mechanisms, and a culture that encourages knowledge sharing. Management should also develop safe communication channels to reduce organizational silence and implement transparent performance evaluation systems to limit political behaviors and favoritism.

While this study reveals key dynamics of CBS in hotel kitchens, several avenues for future research remain. First, as this study used a qualitative, cross-sectional design, future work could employ longitudinal approaches to examine the long-term impact of CBS on career progression, burnout, and turnover intention. Mixed-method studies could also quantitatively test the qualitative findings on larger samples to enhance generalizability. Additionally, future studies could investigate leadership approaches — such as ethical, servant, or transformational leadership — to determine their potential in weakening CBS and strengthening trust among employees. Finally, research could examine not only CBS's effects on psychological well-being and motivation but also its indirect consequences on service quality, innovation capacity, and customer experience, offering tourism enterprises strategic insights for workforce retention and sustainable service quality.

Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates that crab bucket syndrome (CBS) among young chefs is not merely an outcome of individual jealousy but rather a systemic and institutionalized phenomenon shaped by organizational injustice, knowledge hiding, organizational silence, and political behavior. These intertwined dynamics negatively affect employees' motivation, career development, and intention to remain in the tourism sector. The study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing CBS as a multi-level organizational problem embedded within structural and cultural dynamics rather than as an isolated interpersonal issue. In doing so, it highlights the critical role of fair management practices, transparent career systems, and supportive organizational climates in mitigating destructive competition. From a practical perspective, tourism enterprises—particularly hotel kitchens—should prioritize establishing merit-based promotion systems, fostering open communication climates, and discouraging knowledge hoarding behaviors to ensure sustainable workforce development. Addressing these issues is essential not only for improving individual well-being but also for enhancing organizational performance and long-term sectoral sustainability.

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