

Strategic changes in talent development and leadership management in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong

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Received 29 October 2023

Revised 30 March 2024

24 August 2024

Accepted 12 September 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This paper identifies the strategic changes and explores the solutions for talent development and leadership management to address the challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong.

Design/methodology/approach – In this study, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven key personnel (funeral director, salesperson, coffin shop owner, and mortuary transporter) engaged in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. Thematic coding was used to identify and organize emerging themes from the data.

Findings – Four overarching themes were identified: (1) Perception of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong; (2) Recruitment, retention, and talent development; (3) Prospects of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong; and (4) Other novel challenges. The findings reveal continuous, radical, and complex challenges that may exceed the capacity of any leader to develop workable solutions.

Originality/value – The funeral service industry is facing radical challenges in modern times. A death-denying attitude is observed, which has severely undermined the study of the funeral service industry.

Keywords Life and death, Funeral service industry, Leadership, Death-denying attitude, Hong Kong

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The emergence of the modern funeral industry has been shaped by the evolution of various elements within the industry, notably the profession of embalmer and the embalming process since the mid-20th century. Currently, there is a noticeable trend toward fewer traditional funerals and an increase in cremations due to two main factors. Firstly, the baby boomer generation is becoming more eco-conscious and is exploring body disposal methods that have less environmental impact. Secondly, the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has led consumers to seek more cost-effective body disposal options, with cremation providing such feasible solutions (Beard and Burger, 2020; Kumar, 2023). Additionally, there is an increasing use of technology and numerous alternative approaches to memorializing the deceased and disposing of remains, deviating from traditional funeral practices. It is now common for funeral homes to develop extensive websites and utilize a



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Public Administration and Policy
Vol. 27 No. 3, 2024
pp. 291-303
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2517-679X
p-ISSN: 1727-2645
DOI 10.1108/PAP-10-2023-0144

wide range of social media platforms. Furthermore, various funeral homes have adopted tailor-made slideshow videos and presentations of the deceased's life, real-time streaming videos of funerals and visitations, and state-of-the-art audio technology to enhance the funeral service technologically. Moreover, the funeral industry has expanded the use of technology in the preparation, storage, and display of bodies (Beard and Burger, 2017; Fletcher and McGowan, 2021). Research by Lau *et al.* (2020), Lee *et al.* (2022), and Shelvock *et al.* (2022) indicates that environmentally friendly funerals, such as ecological, natural, and green funerals, are becoming a future trend in the funeral industry.

The study of the universal phenomenon of life and death has attracted considerable interest from various disciplines (Beard and Burger, 2020). Life and death are unique yet inevitable phenomena. Notably, death-denying cultures and attitudes are observed across different societies and cultures. There is a long history of studying life and death in literature, and these concepts are presented differently across various cultures. However, a common feature in facing death is the attitude of denial, which has become one of the biggest challenges for end-of-life products and services. Beard and Burger (2020) stated that researchers have conducted numerous studies on death, including reviews of both contemporary and historical funeral rituals and rites, legal regulation of the funeral industry, cultural and social changes influencing the industry, gender and race differences within the industry, consumer knowledge of the funeral process, and the pricing of funerals. Notably, studies related to leadership development and talent management strategies in the funeral service industry appear limited. Despite the universality of the industry, its work remains widely under-studied in the literature (Ludlum and Ludlum, 2010). Furthermore, the importance of the funeral service industry from the perspective of leadership theory, particularly in understanding the role of the funeral director, is underdeveloped (Chism and Strawser, 2015; Fletcher and McGowan, 2021). Funeral directors perform various daunting tasks and encounter numerous challenges related to religious beliefs, technological and scientific innovations, and family preferences. As family expectations continuously evolve and technological advancements progress, funeral directors must adapt accordingly (Roche *et al.*, 2022; Bi and Ploeger-Lyons, 2022).

More importantly, there is a lack of definite studies about the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. The most comprehensive and recent work on the subject was published over two decades ago by Chan (2000), who concluded that socioeconomic factors had altered the way people manage death in Hong Kong. Notably, Hong Kong has undergone a period of intensive urbanization, which has brought about the homogeneity of a Chinese material culture relating to death and funerals. As a result, funeral services have turned into ready-made, homogenized commodity sets. The current study aims to explore the challenges and implications of talent management and leadership solutions in the funeral business in Hong Kong in response to these ongoing challenges. Therefore, the research question of the study is: What are the challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong, and how do talent management and leadership play a role in addressing these challenges?

Literature review

The funeral service industry in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a highly urbanised and densely populated city with over 7 million people (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2024), fusing traditional Chinese values with substantial influence from Western culture due to its colonial history. There are approximately 64,000 deaths yearly (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2024). The funeral service industry in Hong Kong is mainly operated as a family business, and the key stakeholders are divided into two categories: the coffin shops and the funeral parlours, and they are referred to as the

undertakers (Chan, 2000). The funeral business in Hong Kong is organised and commercialised. It is a profitable business and has attracted the two largest funeral service providers listed in the stock market (Low, 2019). The evolution of the business model from a family-owned business to an enterprise brought significant challenges (Jalland, 2006). Moreover, funeral businesses in Hong Kong adopt a standardised and conventional marketing strategy of generating sales through referral, and homogenised “package services”. The high urbanisation and medicalisation of death also affect the way people manage death (Chan, 2000).

Leadership and talent development in the funeral service industry in the face of challenges

The funeral service industry is found to be a male-dominated industry. In America, women are underrepresented as funeral directors (Penepent, 2015). It is assumed that funeral directing is synonymous with a masculine role identity and is considered to be a male-dominated profession (Cathles *et al.*, 2010). Although the scope of the funeral director’s responsibilities is gender-neutral, the funeral profession exhibits a gender imbalance that favors men. In recent years, increased visibility of the industry and shifts in the labour force have been observed in the funeral service industry. In America, where funeral directing and embalming are primarily dominated by white males, it has become increasingly open to women and minorities, and there is a need for a better-educated funeral industry workforce (Whittaker, 2005). In Hong Kong, males primarily dominate the funeral service industry (Lau *et al.*, 2023).

With a predictably increasing number of deaths of baby boomers, talent management is, therefore, a must for the funeral service industry. There is a need to recruit new workers in the industry, and importantly, provide professional training and a foreseeable career progression to retain them and develop a career in the industry. Recent news articles have stated that there are new joiners who are interested in joining the workforce in the funeral service industry due to the attractive monetary rewards. On the contrary, career progression is a discouraging factor in attracting newcomers to the industry (Lau *et al.*, 2023). Nonetheless, there are limited empirical findings to validate these two contrasting views.

The combination of transactional and transformational traits can be contributing elements to the leadership culture of the funeral home (Havlak, 2014). In a quantitative research study, the authors found that leadership style is correlated with the culture of the organization. Notably, the authors made an essential point that funeral homes have been following the same practices for providing products and services despite the rising cost of delivering these products and services, and the reluctance to change. Getting employees to conform and recognise the leadership of the managers, therefore, becomes essential and correlates with organisational culture and thus enables the provision of new strategies for serving the changing demographics.

Research design

Research methodology

To address the research questions, the study adopted a qualitative approach (i.e., interviews) to obtain a deeper and richer understanding of the meanings people attribute to funeral service incidents and actions, and to investigate the complex scenarios faced by funeral service researchers and industry practitioners. Initially, a pilot study was carried out to assess content validity. Following ethical approval from the University of Sunderland Ethics Committee, participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, a group of non-probability sampling techniques, is especially useful for exploring information-rich cases (Guarte and Barrios, 2007). Seven participants were invited to join the study

through direct communication within the researcher’s network. Participants were informed about the study’s purpose and provided their consent. All participants remained anonymous. The interviews were scheduled on various days throughout August and September 2020 and were conducted face-to-face in a conference room at the researcher’s office. A topic guide was used, and the interviews followed a semi-structured format to facilitate in-depth discussions. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the current challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong and the corresponding changes. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the interview if they felt distressed or uncomfortable.

After an in-depth literature review, guiding questions were designed for the qualitative interviews and are provided below in English. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted face-to-face in Cantonese. The study included four males and three females, all Hong Kong Chinese, aged 31 to 60 years. Participants had at least five years of working experience in the funeral industry in Hong Kong, holding various capacities such as funeral directors, salespersons, coffin shop owners, and mortuary transporters. Selection criteria required participants to have at least five years of experience in the funeral service industry, membership in a funeral association, and extensive industry networks. This allowed the researcher to gather diverse insights and perspectives on the overall funeral service industry in Hong Kong. The interviews were audio-recorded to enable the researcher to focus on in-depth discussions with the participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a coding approach was used for data analysis. Since the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, excerpts were translated into English. The profiles of the interviewees and the interview questions are listed in [Tables 1 and 2](#), respectively.

Analysis

The present study applied grounded theory using a thematic analysis approach to identify emerging themes from the data, a common method in qualitative research. The data analysis process included three key stages: data reduction, data display, and interpretation. The researcher continued conducting interviews until thematic saturation was reached, meaning no new information was being uncovered ([Austin and Sutton, 2014](#)). Subsequently, the data were grouped and utilized to describe the phenomenon. Thematic analysis involves searching for themes that describe the phenomenon ([Daly et al., 1997](#)) and includes identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas ([Guest et al., 2012](#)). The transcripts were analyzed for recurring words, phrases, or themes, which led to an initial understanding of the dominant themes. The findings were then presented under headings that best described the emerging themes. The data were coded and grouped into common themes to provide clarity for the reader. Through repeated analysis, the researcher identified four thematic categories, which were divided into ten sectional headings. Interviewers and

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Position	Number of Years of Working Experience
1	Female	41-50	Funeral Director	25
2	Female	51-60	Salesperson	6
3	Male	51-60	Salesperson	15
4	Male	51-60	Coffin Shop Owner	20
5	Male	31-40	Mortuary Transporter (i.e. responsible for the transport of deceased bodies)	5
6	Female	41-50	Salesperson	20
7	Male	41-50	Salesperson	21

Table 1.
Interviewee Profiles

Source: By authors

Interview Questions	
Q1	How long have you been working in the funeral service industry? How and why did you initially join the funeral service industry?
Q2	In your opinion, how do people generally perceive the funeral service industry? What reactions do you receive from others, such as family and friends, when they learn that you are working in this field?
Q3	What are your thoughts on the current challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong?
Q4	Do you believe the funeral service industry is becoming more competitive today? In your specific role, do you find it more challenging and competitive compared to previous years?
Q5	What are the typical pathways or steps for individuals interested in joining the funeral service industry?
Q6	Are you involved in the recruitment of new employees?
Q7	Is technology helpful in attracting newcomers to join the funeral service industry?
Q8	How do you perceive your career progression in the funeral service industry, and what are your thoughts on career advancement opportunities for newcomers?
Q9	Could you provide more details about the demographics of workers in the funeral service industry? Is there a preference for hiring males or females?
Q10	To what extent has technology impacted the growth and development of your funeral service business?
Q11	What factors do you believe would be helpful in sustaining your funeral service business?
Q12	How has the pandemic affected your work and the funeral service industry?

Source: By authors

Table 2.
Interview Questions

experienced researchers were invited to review the coding, integrate identical codes, examine them, and minimize duplications (Sutton and Austin, 2015). After analyzing the entire data set, four overarching themes were identified, as shown in Table 3.

Findings and results

Perception of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong

(a) Taboo nature of the funeral business

Funeral rites are often regarded as “taboo” (Han, 2016), reflecting a death-denying attitude prevalent across various cultures and societies. This attitude involves using psychological and behavioral defenses to deny the existence of death. Such a mindset seeks to avoid reflecting on death-related products to mitigate anticipated negative emotions (Lau *et al.*, 2023). This death-denying attitude was evident during the interviews conducted for the present study. The researchers observed that participants frequently referred to the funeral business as “this industry”, conspicuously avoiding the explicit terms “funeral” or “funeral service”.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Perception of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong	1.1 Taboo nature of the funeral service industry 1.2 Mysterious perception 1.3 Evolving impression in recent years
2. Recruitment, retention, and talent development	2.1 Referrals and Family-Owned Businesses 2.2 Newcomers
3. Prospects of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong	3.1 Sustainable development 3.2 The realm of technology 3.3 Intense competition
4. Other novel challenges	4.1 Funeral rites 4.2 COVID-19 Pandemic

Source: By authors

Table 3.
Summary of Themes
and Sub-themes

(b) *Mysterious perception*

The words or phrases “mysterious” and “brave” were mentioned several times during the interview when the participants were asked, “How do people generally perceive the funeral service industry?”.

According to Interviewee 1 (funeral director),

People perceive those who work in the funeral service industry as brave and unafraid of ghosts. Yes, it is true. Working with dead people is not an easy task for some. After all, Chinese people believe in the existence of spirits, which can be frightening for some. They may wonder, ‘Will the spirits follow me home?’. So, it takes some guts to work in this industry. Importantly, the industry is not ‘open’ enough in certain matters, and people are unsure about what we do. It is a mysterious industry.

According to Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner),

Many years ago, it was an industry which people did not want to talk about it. It was once an industry that people avoided discussing. Many years ago, it was an industry which people did not want to talk about. My family and friends gave me strange looks if they knew I worked in this industry. Due to superstitions, my mother-in-law did not let me visit her home during Chinese New Year. I could only visit her after the 15th day of the Lunar Calendar, and I could not visit my friends as people usually do during Chinese New Year. However, things have improved in recent years. My mother-in-law now allows me to visit her during Chinese New Year, and I can also go eat dim sum with my friends.

Recruitment, retention, and talent development

(a) *Referrals and family-owned businesses*

“Referrals” and “Family-owned businesses” emerged as overlapping sub-themes when participants were asked, “How and why did you initially join the funeral service industry?”. Four out of five participants expressed that they joined the funeral service industry either by inheriting a family business or through referrals from friends. In other words, the network had already been established when the participants began working in the industry. Notably, the word or phrase “fate” was frequently mentioned by participants as a reason for joining the industry or when advising outsiders interested in working in this field.

According to Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner),

I have been working in the industry for over 20 years and was referred by my friend. I think it was just an opportunity that came by serendipity. I did not intend to work in this industry at all, but here I am. I was working in another company and then started another business. That business did not succeed, but it led to the opportunity to start the shop I have now. It has been doing okay; at least I won't go hungry with this shop.

Interviewee 5 (mortuary transporter) is the only exception among the participants in that he did not have any prior connection to the funeral industry before joining the workforce. He stated,

I think I am a rare exception in that I joined the industry not through a referral. Yes, a rare exception. Usually, people work in the industry because they have a connection, such as it being a family business. For me, there was a window of opportunity, and it felt like having a mid-career change. I was working for the Mass Transit Railway Corporation, then joined the industry. So, it is just like that.

(b) *Newcomers*

Interviewee 1 (funeral director) confirmed that,

The aging population is a problem faced by the funeral industry in Hong Kong nowadays.

However, most of the participants stated that they have never recruited or are not planning to recruit newcomers to the industry.

Furthermore, Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner) stated,

The seemingly luring remuneration of around 50k to 60k per month, as reported by news articles recently, is not accurate. It takes a long time to reach a sales peak that can sustain a living, making it challenging for new joiners. Therefore, some new joiners might quit when they are unable to generate any sales. For newcomers without existing connections in the industry, seminars, and schools are now operating to attract people interested in learning more about potential opportunities.

I delivered seminars previously, and some of my students expressed interest in joining the workforce, so there they were. Initially, there were around 10 of them, but half dropped out later. Do not think this is an industry where you can make fast money. If anyone is interested in working in the industry, I believe they should have enough savings to sustain their living for at least six months. More importantly, they must be very, very interested in working in the industry to give it a try.

Interviewee 2 (salesperson) said,

We do not actively recruit newcomers. Usually, newcomers join us through someone they know who is already working in this industry, or their family is already in the business. I do not think you can say there is a prospect in the industry, can you? It is not a company or some sort of big organization. There is no career progression. So these descriptions — prospect, career progression — don't fit us.

Prospects of the funeral service industry in Hong Kong

(a) *Sustainable development*

In the face of radical and continuous challenges, the funeral service industry needs to implement corresponding strategic changes to cope and thrive. The literature indicates that strategies are necessary. Researchers have further explored how stakeholders in the funeral service industry respond to these challenges and sustain their businesses. However, the participants appeared hesitant in their responses to this question.

Interviewee 2 (salesperson) mentioned,

I do not know what exactly can be done, to be honest. I don't have much idea. I might not be the right person to answer this question.

Interviewee 1 (funeral director) said,

What can I do? I do not know. I will just do my job, as usual, I guess. It is my family's business, so it depends if my children want to take over the business. If they are not interested, then I may just close it down when I get old.

(b) *The realm of technology*

Technology has a profound impact on the funeral service industry. Particularly, social media has become an educational platform for death-related information, products, and services. However, in Hong Kong, limited literature or research findings indicate such trends. Therefore, the researchers were eager to gather information from stakeholders working in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. In response to the question, "To what extent has

technology impacted the growth and development of your funeral service business?”, most participants perceived that technology is impacting their business to a certain extent.

Interviewee 3 (salesperson) said,

Technology does impact us. Information can be found online much more easily these days. Prices also become more transparent, and many of my peers now put their price lists online. This leads to increased competition. I think technology can be helpful, as customers can reach us more easily. In the old days, referrals were the main channel through which we could get customers. Moreover, technology circulates information more easily. Customers used to trust whatever the salesperson told them, but now they can get information more easily online. One downside is that when my peers put their price lists online, it becomes more competitive. I just hope that it won't turn into a vicious cycle of competing on lower prices.

Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner) said,

Customers can get information much more easily online. Death is not something they avoid talking about now. I deliver talks about funeral services in Hong Kong, and people are less taboo about the topic. So, they know where they can get information. It is no longer a business that relies solely on word of mouth.

(c) Intense competition

The funeral business in Hong Kong is both organized and commercialized. It is a profitable industry that has attracted the two largest funeral service providers listed on the stock market (Low, 2019). This development might impact family-based funeral businesses in Hong Kong. However, participants expressed that the fierce competition they face is not from the corporate nature of the business but from regional competition among their existing counterparts.

Interviewee 4 (coffin shop owner) said,

Yes, I heard about those listed companies in the Hong Kong stock market. It does not impact us, though. We are just doing our business as usual. Many of us are still operating as family businesses in the older generation. So, it depends on whether our next generation wants to take over the business or not. We are not aiming to earn a big fortune, just enough to sustain ourselves. If my next generation does not want to take over the business, then I will let it go. It is okay. So, I don't care if the industry is getting more competitive.

Interviewee 3 (salesperson) said,

Yes, I think the industry is getting more competitive. More people are working in the industry now. To get more sales, some of them will lower their prices. It is not a good sign, is it? It leads to vicious competition, and this is not what I would like to see. The relationship between salespeople and families is changing nowadays, too. In the old days, families simply trusted whatever the salesperson told them. But now, information can be accessed easily online or through other sources. Families, therefore, have a better idea of what they are looking for and what they can get.

Other novel challenges

To conclude the interview, the researchers asked the participants if they had any other information or views they would like to share from their working experience in the funeral service business in Hong Kong. One participant mentioned the changing funeral rites and rituals.

(a) Funeral rites

Interviewee 5 (mortuary transporter) said,

I think one of the biggest challenges faced by the industry now is the losing grip on tradition. For instance, the 'burning joss paper' rituals are not allowed these days. I believe it is imperative to hold on to these rituals. Moreover, many people now prefer simplified ceremonies, unlike the old days when lavish ceremonies were more common.

(b) *COVID-19 pandemic*

With the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were asked, "How has the pandemic affected your work and the funeral service industry?". This was also the concluding question in all interviews. Most participants expressed that the pandemic had minimal impact on their work, but it appeared that the working procedures in handling human remains became more precautionary due to the contagious virus.

According to Interviewee 3 (salesperson),

Of course, the virus has an impact on us. Deceased bodies are now transported directly from the hospital. When the virus first began, we did not pay much attention and just worked as usual. Recently, we have been more careful, especially in observing the color of the tag. More precautionary procedures are also being taken.

Interviewee 5 (mortuary transporter) said,

The pandemic does not affect us. I think it is because of the nature of my job. People are still dying every day, and I am just working as usual. If you want to know if there is an impact on the industry, I think many people have lost their jobs or have less income now, and this affects the budget they want to spend on funerals. That is the only impact I can think of.

Discussion

Previous literature indicated that funeral rites are often "taboo" in nature (Han, 2016), and a death-denying attitude is observed across different cultures and societies, manifesting through psychological and behavioral defenses to deny the existence of death. The findings from the current study are closely related to some of the findings in the extant literature. In line with the previous findings, the death-denying attitude and the taboo nature are still prevalent and confirmed in contemporary society. One striking observation during the interviews was that participants barely mentioned the term "funeral" or "funeral service", often referring to it as "this industry" instead. This reluctance to use the terms "funeral" and "funeral service" is deeply rooted in tradition. To address this issue, the government may consider supporting institutions to deliver specialized courses on funerals and funeral services or establish funeral training institutions. These institutions could provide a variety of on-the-job training courses related to funerals and funeral services. Such courses may help improve public perceptions of the funeral industry.

The increased use of technology has led funeral homes to become more technologically oriented in general, as their consumer base increasingly relies on technology to access information (Lau *et al.*, 2023). A digital presence for funeral products and services can serve as an online education platform to demystify sensitive and controversial products or services (Beard and Burger, 2017). Social media is widely used to promote the businesses. In response, prices have become more transparent, customers can access services more easily, and the industry has become more competitive. Despite these advancements, several bereaved families still report experiencing instances of cheating by funeral operators. To address this issue, the government may consider developing an IT platform to manage funeral operators, providing information on funeral service packages and their acceptable price ranges.

In building around the traditional foundation of funeral products and services, families nowadays tend to choose less expensive options based on economic factors. The rise of customized funerals that reflect the uniqueness of individuality is becoming more prevalent, especially among the baby boomer generation, who are opting for custom-designed funerals (Lynch, 2004; Beard and Burger, 2017). Contemporary funerals are often chosen from a cafeteria-style presentation of what might loosely be termed “rites” along with the necessary accouterments and selected techniques for personalization, all aimed at “celebrating the uniqueness” of the deceased. The new “me” generation further emphasizes the need to address themes of personalization and individualism over traditional funeral practices (Beard and Burger, 2017). Consequently, the funeral service industry needs to adapt to changing customer needs and desires. This study confirmed that the pattern of funeral rites and rituals in Hong Kong is changing. These changes include the personalization of funeral ceremonies and the simplification of funeral practices, which are now preferred by the younger generation. Additionally, the economic impact brought by COVID-19 has influenced these preferences. Recently, a few funeral operators (e.g., Forever Green) have introduced innovative funeral ceremony activities, such as designing ceremonies based on the life story of the deceased. However, there is a lack of promotion channels and strategies for such innovative funeral products or services. Consequently, citizens are not confident in trying innovative funeral products or services during their life planning. Furthermore, the present study observed a lack of change, innovation, and a fear of change within the organizational culture of funeral businesses (Crespell and Hansen, 2008). This resistance is primarily due to the conservative culture of family-run businesses. Outsiders and younger generations find it difficult to obtain information on how to enter the funeral industry and establish a career path.

Conclusion

Organizational survival in a globally competitive environment depends heavily on leadership development and talent management (Day, 2007). Therefore, to survive and thrive, successful organizations must be aware of their leadership talent and how best to develop it across all levels (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). The present study provided findings that meet its objectives, some of which are consistent with previous research. It identified the challenges faced by the funeral service industry in Hong Kong and examined leadership and talent management strategies in response to market changes. Importantly, the study provided recommendations to the management of the funeral service industry on how to respond to these changes.

Firstly, the sustainability of the funeral industry is a debatable issue for the future. In Hong Kong, the funeral service industry is facing a shortage of workers, and the aging workforce with the static demographics of employees presents a significant challenge in driving change. According to Leung *et al.* (2023), the average age of workers in the funeral service industry is 50, with some of the oldest workers being over 90 years of age. Concurrently, the death rate is predicted to increase over the next five to ten years as the baby boomers are ageing. This study found that recruitment in this industry is not conducted through traditional channels such as job advertisements but rather through referrals and family business networks. This indicates that there must be some form of established network to join the funeral service industry. More importantly, factors such as “fate” or opportunity play a crucial role. Unlike other industries, funeral workers do not have clear career prospects; their success depends on their network and the opportunity to establish and expand their customer base. Talent management, the practice of using strategic human resource planning to improve business value and achieve organizational goals, is essential in this context. It involves not only recruiting talented individuals but also retaining them,

especially when the business faces challenges. Therefore, talent management is a critical success factor for the sustainability of the funeral industry.

Secondly, funeral directors lack professionalization. The experience of unsatisfactory professional conduct and incompetence can be jeopardizing. Therefore, demonstrating control, knowledge, and skills are essential characteristics of a profession, including authority and credibility, community sanction, a code of ethics, and professional culture (Greenwood, 1957; Bottomley *et al.*, 2017). In response, educational institutions may offer training courses for funeral directors to enrich their knowledge and skills. As a result, funeral directors may demonstrate professional consistency as a “means to control the asymmetric expert-client relation” (Abbott, 1988, p. 15). The study has generated a foundation for forthcoming research. The findings primarily concentrate on qualitative analysis, reflecting continuous, radical, and complex challenges that may exceed the capacity of any single leader to develop workable solutions. Identifying and tackling novel challenges and generating human capital through talent development is critical for leaders to adopt the new transformation of the funeral service industry. In the face of these challenges, scholars have emphasized that leadership development is a vital process for sustainable organizational development. However, the present study utilized a small sample size and was unable to find significant findings regarding talent management and leadership development in the funeral service industry in Hong Kong. This preliminary study constructs a framework for developing a large-scale survey involving researchers, policymakers, and industry practitioners in future research. This will be useful in addressing the leadership style most suitable for solving novel challenges and identifying the main challenges leaders face when encountering changes in the funeral service industry.

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