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## **Tourism and Hospitality Undergraduates' Perception Towards Career Choice in the Tourism Industry in Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

Tourism and hospitality students are a valuable part of this potential labour force. Several previous studies found that students have a negative perception of jobs in the tourism industry, while few studies have investigated that students have a positive perception of tourism jobs in different countries. Hence, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of tourism and hospitality undergraduates' when choosing a career in the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. The study is a survey and is based on a quantitative approach. The structured online questionnaire surveyed the students' perception regarding the nature of the jobs, physical working conditions, social status, industry person-congeniality, and promotion opportunities offered within the industry. At the same time, respondents were asked to consider the COVID-19 pandemic when answering questions. The responses from 120 state university students were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation coefficient analysis, multiple linear regression analysis, t-test and ANOVA tests. The finding of the research study shows that Social status, Industry person-congeniality, and promotion

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opportunities had a significant positive association with the career choice of undergraduates in the tourism industry during the post-COVID-19 pandemic, and there was a significant negative relationship between the nature of jobs and career choice. However, the physical working conditions of employment in the tourism industry do not affect the career choice of undergraduates. Significantly, among five independent variables career choice of undergraduates in the tourism industry was highly influenced by the industry person- congeniality factor. The study concludes that the tourism and hospitality students positively perceived the social status of employment, industry person-congeniality, and promotion opportunities of employment while negatively perceiving the nature of the tourism industry. Accordingly, the research recommends that responsible authorities in Sri Lanka should take steps forward to increase the student's awareness regarding tourism industry working conditions to create good perceptions among them.

Keywords: Tourism Undergraduates, Perception, Career choice, Tourism, Sri Lanka

## **Introduction**

The tourism industry, which contributes well to the economies of many countries worldwide, has not been able to reap the full benefits of the industry due to the shortage of a knowledgeable and skilful workforce (Richardson, 2008). The tourism industry is becoming more popular among students recently. Also, university graduates and students focus more on tourism careers than ever before. However, even though the number of tourism students rapidly increases worldwide, t. (Lee Bamford, 2012), explained two possible reasons: the industry doesn't value a degree and students' negative perceptions about the industry. Moreover, many researchers paid attention to the second reason for decades. Therefore, many studies concluded perception/ attitude or intention of tourism as a career perceived by students as having poor wages, long working hours, low stability, and poor working conditions (Aksu & Köksal, 2005; Kim et al., 2010; Kuslivan & Kuslivan, 2000; Richardson, 2008).

The tourism industry is key to Sri Lanka's employment generation, contributing 11% to the country's total labour force in 2018 (International Labour Organization, 2020). Further, the (Tourism Skills Committee, 2018)

reported that nearly 25,000 to 30,000 additional workers would be required each year to cater to the projected increase in visitor arrivals and the replacement for those leaving and retiring. In Sri Lanka, the number of tourism and tourism-related diplomas, degree programs, and course programs offered by several institutions is present. Significantly, government universities have taken a commendable decision to include tourism and tourism-related study programs in their system. However, the annual output of 1,500 tourism industry graduates is insufficient to meet the industry standards ("Tourism Development Strategy," 2020). Tourism and hospitality students entering the tourism industry workforce in the future are more important in this scenario. Several studies found that tourism students negatively perceive jobs in the industry (Amissah et al., 2020; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2012), while few studies found it positive (Richardson & Thomas, 2012; Wijesundara, 2015, vol. Tourism, Leisure and Global Change, volume 2) and (Roney & Oztin, 2007) examined that overall perceptions of respondents were neither favourable nor unfavourable. Here, the question arises of the perception of tourism students of Sri Lanka in this regard. Therefore, this research aims to examine the perceptions of tourism and hospitality undergraduates regarding career choices in the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. The current study examined and seeks to answer the research question through state university tourism and hospitality undergraduate students in Sri Lanka.

Undergraduates' perception of career choice concerning the nature of the jobs, social status, industry person- congeniality, physical working conditions, and the promotion opportunities in the tourism industry. Accordingly, the specific objectives are;

- To investigate the effect of undergraduate career choice on the nature of jobs, social status, industry person-congeniality, physical working conditions, and promotion opportunities in the tourism industry.
- To determine the most influencing factor for undergraduates to perceive career choice.
- To investigate whether undergraduates' demographic characteristics affect undergraduate career choices.

The findings of this study will be useful for tourism and hospitality undergraduate students, tourism planners, scholars, government, and tourism businesses.

## **Literature Review**

### **COVID-19 and Tourism and Hospitality Industry**

The tourism industry is one of the leading industries in the world and is growing rapidly while contributing to the socio-economic development of the countries. The downside of this service industry is that political crises, pandemics, natural disasters, etc., easily victimize it. The most recent example of such a negative impact on the tourism industry is the COVID-19 epidemic. Worldwide international tourist arrivals declined by 98% due to travel restrictions in May 2020 (Sucheran, 2021). Also, the UNWTO indicates that global gross domestic product could reduce by 1.5% to 2.8% while reporting the losses in export revenues from tourism could befall between USD 910 billion to USD 1.2 trillion in 2020.

Meanwhile, World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) indicated that the job loss in the tourism industry in 2020 was 62 million, representing a drop of 18.5%. As a result of the pandemic, many countries imposed travel bans and restrictions for COVID-19, and the arrivals of tourists in Sri Lanka decreased by 71% at the initial stage of COVID-19 (Amaratunga et al., 2020). In particular, the decline of tourist arrivals with travel bans, lockdowns, curfews, and quarantines led to a drop in tourism industry businesses. According to (Jayapriya Senanayake, 2021), hotel occupancy rates in Sri Lanka declined to nearly zero for hotels outside of Colombo by the end of March 2021.

### **Tourism and Hospitality Employment**

The tourism and hospitality industry is very important for employment generation; in 2018, employment in the tourism industry directly contributed to 3.8% of the total workforce globally (International Labour Organization, 2020). Similarly, in 2019, the tourism industry, directly and indirectly, accounted for 10.3% of total global employment. However, the tourism and hospitality industry relatively has a high labour turnover (Atef & Al Balushi, 2017; Lee Bamford, 2012; Yildirim et al., 2021). Many scholars explained that the worldwide tourism and hospitality industry has a shortage of skilful and committed workforce (Lee Bamford, 2012; Richardson, 2008, 2009; Yildirim et al., 2021). The tourism industry in Sri Lanka creates long-lasting career opportunities; on the other hand, there aren't enough, and there will not be

sufficient skilled Sri Lankans to meet the market demand in the tourism industry (International Labour Organization, 2020).

Dissatisfaction with employment in the tourism industry is a major reason for its labour turnover. Therefore, it is important to identify job areas that tourism and hospitality undergraduate students are more interested in pursuing in the future. According to (Shah et al., 2021), students were interested in core hotel-related positions such as food production and bakery, and front office jobs, while jobs in the housekeeping department garnered low interest. (Atef & Al Balushi, 2017) holds different findings to this, Oman's students were less preferred for hospitality work in hotels and restaurants, and the poor image of Omani society was directly affected by this. Research conducted in Indonesia found that education level impacts selecting vocational areas; diploma students are most likely to engage with the accommodation sector as their career field, while undergraduate students are more likely to go with transportation and tourism consulting services. This aligns with the (Roney & Oztin, 2007) study, where the finding revealed that respondents were most preferred the accommodation sector than the food and beverage sector and others after their graduation. However, this segment is not researched in the Sri Lankan context yet and the current study will examine this regard.

### **Tourism and Hospitality Education**

(Yıldırım et al., 2021) Mentioned that tourism education is connected with vocational education. The concept of vocational education is defined as education that is based on vocation and employment. Moreover, (Marković, 2006) examined that tourism and hospitality management education is multidisciplinary and incorporates and applies perspectives in sociology and other fields. The importance of tourism education for jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry varies from country to country. For example, experience is key to gaining employment in the sector in New Zealand than tourism education (Lee Bamford, 2012). The same study found that it believed that engaging in internationally renowned educational institutions will make it easier for students to get a job (Lee Bamford, 2012). Next, the Turkish context study found that students emphasized that studying tourism is a good career investment (Roney & Oztin, 2007). According to (Bandara & Gangananda, 2021), educational factors seriously impact career selection in the tourism and hospitality industry in Sri Lanka.

## **Career Perception of Tourism and Hospitality Students**

Many studies focused on factors that influence students' career decision-making. This study will review many research articles on career choice perceptions of tourism and hospitality students. (Rosyidi, 2021) the three most important factors related to the nature of work are; a fun environment, enjoyable work, and friendly co-workers. (Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2012) the most important attribute, like the job, is enjoyable to work. Another widely accepted variable was too long working hours( Kuslivan & Kuslivan, n.d.; Richardson, 2008). "Generation Y does not appear to want to work long hours; they do want to work hard and have a good work-life balance" (Maxwell et al., 2010, p. 60). However, (Lee Bamford, 2012) examined slightly different results than others. He found that some students were unsure whether working hours are too long, and educational institution impacts this opinion. Another important dimension is pay and benefits. (Atef & Al Balushi, 2017; Kuslivan & Kuslivan, 2000; Lee Bamford, 2012; Richardson, 2008) The industry became less attractive due to the perception of the low salaries of tourism students. When the research applied to Indonesia, tourism and hospitality students consider salary less important (Rosyidi, 2021) while (Richardson, 2009) Investigated that Indian tourism students have the intention that the industry does not offer a good starting salary. Evidence shows that tourism and hospitality undergraduates consider social status less important (Rosyidi, 2021). However, in the Sri Lankan context, female graduates are highly concerned about social status and do not like working in the tourism and hospitality industry after graduation (Karunarathne & Karunarathne, 2016). Many researchers ultimately concluded that tourism students (graduates/undergraduates) have unfavourable perceptions regarding jobs in the industry.

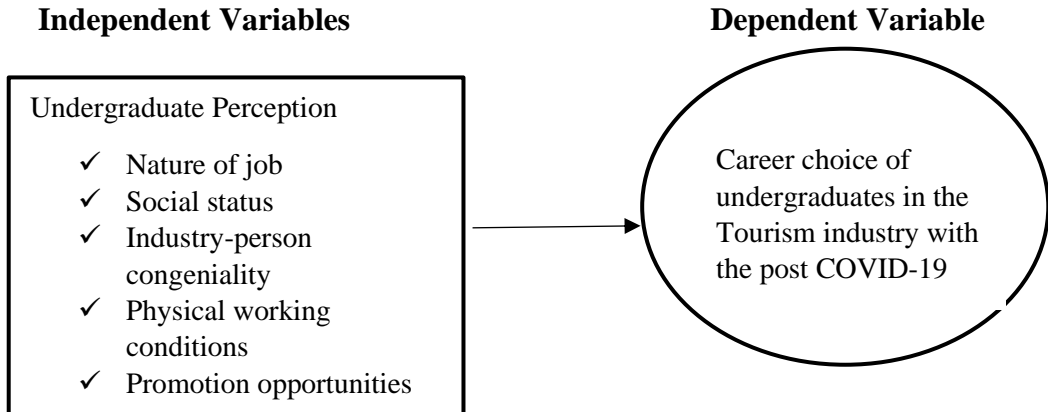


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: (Developed by the author, 2022)

The following hypotheses are formulated based on the study's literature review and conceptual framework.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** The nature of employment in the tourism industry affects the career choice of undergraduates.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Social status of employment in the tourism industry effect on career choice of undergraduates.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Industry- person congeniality of employment in the tourism industry effect on career choice of undergraduates.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Physical working conditions of employment in the tourism industry affect on career choice of undergraduates.

**H<sub>5</sub>:** Promotion opportunities for employment in the tourism industry affect on career choice of undergraduates.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The study was carried out under the quantitative research approach and survey design. The study population is all tourism and hospitality undergraduates in Sri Lanka who are currently following tourism and tourism-related degrees in-state universities. A total of 120 undergraduate students were selected for this study. The sample represents four state universities as the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, the University of Kelaniya, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, and the Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka; they are currently

following tourism-related (Tourism, Hospitality, Event Management, Leisure Management) courses in the first, second, third or fourth of academic years. A stratified random sampling method was used for the study. Here, a structured survey questionnaire will be distributed online to the sample, also known as an online or web-based survey.

Further, the pilot testing was carried out by sending the questionnaire to forty-five (45) students at Rajarata University of Sri Lanka and twenty (20) were returned. This testing was very useful because unclear questions were found, and some required changes. For example, Rajarata University undergraduates become specialized in tourism or hospitality management in their third academic year, but their degree name is Tourism and Hospitality Management; therefore, when answered, some are recognized as a degree name, and some are identified as their specialized area. After fixing issues identified by the pilot test using 30 respondents, the online questionnaire was distributed among the sample, and all the questionnaires were collected at a 100% response rate.

The questionnaire is made up by dividing into two sections section one and section two. The first section was to obtain personal information about the respondents, such as; Gender, University, Academic year, Specializing area of the degree, and whether they chose the degree willingly or not. Moreover, the second part was for factors (variables) that affect undergraduates' career selection in the tourism industry with COVID- the 19 pandemic. Fifty-three questions were asked under six main dependent and independent variables, including nature of jobs, social status, industry person-congeniality, physical working conditions, promotion opportunities, and career choice of undergraduates by using the items identified by (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000).

### **Data Analysis**

Collected data were analyzed using Statistical Procedure for Social Science (SPSS) software which is used for the statistical treatment of data and to test the proposed hypothesis. Data analysis of this study was carried out by using primary data and evaluating the questionnaire responses. The analysis results were interpreted and discussed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

The SPSS software is used to conduct the descriptive analysis. In the descriptive analysis, numerical and graphical methods are used to organize,



demonstrate, and analyze data. Correlation analysis, Regression analysis, Hypothesis testing, and Probability distributions come under inferential statistics. Correlation is used when the researcher needs to explore the relationship between variables. Therefore, correlation analysis uses various statistical tools and techniques to find the relationships between two or more variables.

Moreover, the correlation coefficient uses to discover the degree of the linear link between the two variables or the strength of the association (Fichter & Beucker, 2005, p. 230). Unlike simple linear regression, multiple regression analysis includes more than one predictor (Fichter & Beucker, 2005, p. 240). Hence, it is used to predict the value of a variable based on the value of two or more variables. Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure the reliability and validity of the study.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Discussion**

Through this section, the researcher makes a comparative investigation with the results of the current study and the findings of previous researchers. Also, (Wijesundara, 2015) suggested that future researchers identify perceptions of potential students following tourism-related degrees in Sri Lanka, and the present study fills this gap. The variables for this research were adopted from the (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000) multi-dimensional model. The dual-purpose investigation was launched to develop a multi-dimensional and multi-item attitude scale for measurement by Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000. One of the aims was to investigate tourism students' attitudes towards working in the tourism industry. They conducted research in the Turkish context using tourism and hotel management students. Later, many researchers (Aksu & Köksal, 2005; Chung & Chan, 2017; Lusby & Lusby, 2017; Menemenci & Sucuoglu, 2015; Richardson, 2008; Roney & Oztin, 2007; Tuzunkan, 2016; Wang & Huang, 2014; Wen et al., 2019; Wiligas Biyiri, 2018) used this multi-dimensional scale in their research because of the success of the developed scale.

According to the results of multiple regression analysis, statistically, the nature of the job affected the career choice of tourism and hospitality undergraduates.

These results are compatible with the findings of previous surveys conducted by (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Mannaa M.T, 2020; Wang & Huang, 2014). Also, the impact was found to be negative in the current study, while (Mannaa M.T, 2020) found it positive. However, this finding contradicts that of (Mohd et al., 2016), who examined that the nature of jobs does not affect students' career choices in the tourism industry. Another finding of the current study was that the social status of employment positively affects tourism and the hospitality industry career selection by students. That finding was in line with the results of (King & Hang, 2011; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Sandiford & Seymour, 2010; Wang & Huang, 2014). Further, (Mohd et al., 2016) investigated social status as the most important factor when students choose their careers in the tourism and hospitality industry. According to the results, there was a significant positive relationship between industry person-congeniality and career choice of undergraduates during the post-COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of (Armoo & Neequaye, 2014; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Wen et al., 2019) aligned with the result of the current study. Moreover, the researcher found that the most influential factor for undergraduates' perceived career choice in the tourism and hospitality industry was industry person-congeniality. Similarly, few authors examined industry person-congeniality as the most influential factor underlying students' perceptions (Armoo & Neequaye, 2014; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). One of the important findings of the current study was that physical working conditions have not affected tourism and hospitality undergraduates' career choices during the post-COVID-19 crisis. This finding does not support the finding (Mohammed, 2018) that physical working conditions influence Malaysian Hotel students' career intentions. Also, (Mokaya et al., 2013) revealed that workplace conditions enhance students' intention to join the tourism and hospitality industry. The promotion opportunities in the tourism industry impact undergraduates' career selection decisions was another key finding of the present study. The research study's results (Mohammed, 2018) are similar. Some scholars showed that promotion opportunities caused to increase in people's intention to join the tourism industry (Chuang & Jenkins, 2010; Kim et al., 2010; Richardson, 2008). Other important findings of this study include the following.

The present study investigated whether there was a difference between respondents' genders in their career perceptions. However, the results of many

authors are inconsistent with this finding. (El-Houshy, 2018, p. 811; King & Hang, 2011; Korir & Wafula, 2012; Roney & Oztin, 2007) there was no significant difference between male and female undergraduate students' career perceptions. Another outcome was that there was a significant difference between students' job perception and their university. This finding agreed with the result found by (Roney & Oztin, 2007). Furthermore, the current study investigated the career perception of tourism and hospitality undergraduates changing according to their academic year. Similar results were found by (El-Houshy, 2018, p. 811; Kumar, 2013; Roney & Oztin, 2007). Another alarming finding of the study was that most respondents are willing to work in the tourism industry after graduation during the post-COVID-19 pandemic. (Rosyidi, 2021) identified that the percentage of undergraduates' willingness to work in the concerned industry after COVID-19 is slightly lower than pre-COVID-19. However, if the COVID-19 pandemic was ignored, many scholars found that students were willing to pursue a career in the tourism industry after graduation (Amisshah et al., 2020; Anandhwanlert & Wattanasan, 2017; El-Houshy, 2018; Nunkoo & Chellen, 2010; Richardson & Thomas, 2012). Contrary, (Richardson, 2010; Robinson et al., 2016) found that most students were not likely to pursue tourism careers after graduation.

### **Reliability Analysis**

Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure the internal reliability of the current study. According to the results, Cronbach's alpha value was 0.811, which indicates a high level of internal reliability or highly acceptable of the questionnaire.

## Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std.</b>	<b>Skewness</b>	<b>Kurtosis</b>		
	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Deviation</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Std.</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Std.</b>
				<b>Error</b>		<b>Error</b>
Nature of Jobs	53.5750	6.94717	-.542	.221	3.584	.438
Social Status	21.2083	4.24639	.052	.221	1.575	.438
Industry Person- Congeniality	33.3500	7.19786	.655	.221	1.500	.438
Physical Working Conditions	23.2500	3.98790	.629	.221	2.408	.438
Promotion Opportunities	21.9833	3.56685	.342	.221	4.683	.438
Career Choice	21.0917	4.10574	-.570	.221	1.378	.438
Valid N (listwise)						

Source: (Survey Data, 2022)

Descriptive statistics of the study show that the nature of the jobs variable has the highest average value. Industry person-congeniality has the highest standard deviation, which indicated the data were more spread out. The promotion opportunities variables have the lowest standard deviation, meaning more data was clustered about the mean. When talking about the skewness of the variables, the nature of jobs, and the career choice variables, data were skewed left. All other variables had right-skewed data sets. Also, the nature of employment and promotion opportunities variables data had positive excess kurtosis, while others had platykurtic kurtosis.

### Pearson's Correlation Coefficient Analysis

The following table presents the correlation of each variable with other variables, including both dependent and independent variables. Here, Pearson Correlation was used to detect the power of the relationships between variables.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

	Nature of Jobs	Social Status	Industry Person-Congeniality	Physical Working Conditions	Promotion Opportunities	Career Choice
Nature of Jobs	1					
Social Status	.433** .000	1				
Industry Person-Congeniality	.377** .000	.676** .000	1			
Physical Working Conditions	.514** .000	.482** .000	.351** .000	1		
Promotion Opportunities	.374** .000	.648** .000	.693** .000	.395** .000	1	
Career Choice	.144* .116	.542** .000	.545** .000	.278** .002	.556** .000	1

Source: (Survey Data, 2022)

Accordingly, results of the correlation analysis, social status, industry person-congeniality, and promotion opportunities variables had a moderately significant positive relationship with career choice. Physical working conditions have a weak significant positive association with career choice, while the Nature of job variable has no significant relationship with career choice.

### Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

According to the multiple linear regression analysis, the researcher recognized that the impact of the nature of the job variable on career choice was a significant negative relationship. Social status, industry person-congeniality, and promotion opportunities are significantly positively associated with the career choice of undergraduates in the tourism industry during the post-COVID-19 pandemic. However, a significant negative relationship existed between the nature of jobs and career choice. Also, the physical working conditions variable has a positive but insignificant relationship with career choice. Therefore, the physical working conditions of employment in the

tourism industry do not affect the career choice of undergraduates during post COVID- 19 pandemic. Except for that hypothesis, all other hypotheses of the study were accepted.

Table 3: Model Summary

<b>Model Summary</b>				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.653 <sup>a</sup>	.426	.401	3.17852

a. Predictors: (Constant), nature of jobs, social status, industry person-congeniality, physical working conditions, and promotion opportunities

Source: (Survey Data, 2022)

## Conclusion

The study successfully investigated the negative effect of the nature of jobs in the tourism industry on the career choice of tourism and hospitality undergraduates. In contrast, Social status, industry person-congeniality, and promotion opportunities positively affected career choice. However, the study indicated no statistically significant effect of physical working conditions dimensions on undergraduates' career choices in the tourism industry. The study's second objective was to determine the most influencing factor for undergraduates' perceived career choices. The outcomes statistically show that the industry person-congeniality factor highly affected the willingness to choose tourism industry careers among all five independent variables. Further, the third objective was to investigate whether undergraduates' demographic characteristics affect undergraduate career choices.

Regarding gender, it was found that there was a significant difference between male and female undergraduate students in their career perceptions. According to the ANOVA test, there was a significant difference between academic years and university in undergraduate career choice. However, it was examined that there was no statistically significant difference among students' specializing areas in terms of career choice of undergraduates. Furthermore, the survey data were only collected from four state universities in Sri Lanka; therefore,

the outcomes may not be generalizable to other countries and other universities and institutions of Sri Lanka.

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