



Undergraduates' Perception on Career Selection in Tourism Industry: Before and After Effects of COVID 19

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Abstract : An individual's perception of a career is a critical factor towards the success of any employment. Recently, the COVID-19, the world's largest health pandemic of the century has hit every aspect of global tourism making individual's careers challenging. Particularly, the situation commands undergraduates who follow tourism-related degree programs to re-think about their career selection with fear. Hence, this study was to identify the gap in undergraduates' perception of career selection in the tourism industry before and after the effects of COVID-19 and to examine the major factors that caused to make a gap or remained constant in such critical conditions. A sample of 20 undergraduates who study in the final year of tourism-related degree programmes, in both government and private universities in Sri Lanka was taken to collect data. The sample was formed through homogeneous purposive sampling, and data were collected using structured in-depth interviews. Employing a qualitative research approach, thematic analysis, and systematic consensus-building analysis were utilized to transcribe and analyze the gathered data. The findings indicated that undergraduates' perceptions of career selection differed before and after the pandemic. Moreover, respondents had a more favorable perception of career selection in the tourism industry which was before than post-pandemic. However, after the pandemic, respondents had a negative perception of tourism career selection. According to respondents, the most important factor in selecting a tourism industry career was a considerable starting salary, while the least important factor was job security. Therefore, this research suggests some alternatives for fostering a positive perception of tourism as a career after the pandemic Like, enhance students' practical experience, and career coaching, creating favorable working conditions within the tourism industry careers, updating course curriculums to reflect current industry needs, etc.

Index Terms - COVID 19 pandemic; Tourism industry; Undergraduates' perception; Career selection

LINTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the booming industry in the world. World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) states that the travel and tourism sector was contributed 10.4 percent (USD 9.2 trillion) to global Gross Domestic Production (GDP) in 2019. According to the WTTC, Tourism is an essential industry for global economic development and employment generation. Travel and Tourism (including its direct, indirect and induced impacts) accounted for one out of every four new employment generated globally, accounting for 10.6 percent of all jobs (334 million) and 10.4 percent of global (Oxford economies, 2021).

According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), in 2019 travel and tourism sector contribution was 4.3 percent to the GDP of Sri Lanka. Tourism is considered to be one of the major industries that provide a wide range of employment opportunities. In 2019, the contribution of travel and tourism to employment growth for Sri Lanka was 3.9 percent, and a total of 402607 people were employed in the tourism sector, 173592 were directly working, and 229015 were involved indirectly (SLTDA, 2019). Additionally, SLTDA (2019) reports that 80 percent of direct employment was in hotels and restaurants. Travel agencies and tour operators account for 7 percent of the total, airline accounts for 5 percent, guide accounts for 3 percent, the state sector accounts for 2 percent, tourist shops accounts for 1 percent, recreational facility agencies accounts for 1 percent, and national tour organizations account for 0.5 percent. When occupational classifications are considered, 14.8 percent of employees were in managerial or professional positions. 51.5 percent were classified as technical, clerical or supervisory, and manual operating grades accounted for 33 percent of the total. In each sector, an employee's commitment will be based on his or her perceptions and attitudes toward working in the industry and the types of jobs that are available in the industry.

The Ministry of Economic Development's five-year master plan for 2011-2016 addressed, "The annual output of about 1500 graduates is the industry requirement". The tourism and hospitality industries have always faced difficulties attracting and maintaining qualified personnel (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). A variety of degrees, certifications, and courses have been developed to fill the identified human resource deficit in the accommodation and associated services industries by offering the

appropriate training (Wijesundara, 2015). Therefore, Sri Lankan public and private sector institutions, in particular, provide industry-related degrees, and industry-related courses to enhance practical expertise while developing the soft skills and providing a wide general education. Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (SLITHM) produces nearly 4000 trained personnel each year in Sri Lanka. While the Sabaragamuwa University and the Uva Wellness University produce 50-150 tourism graduates per year (Gamage, 2016). Aside from the University of Rajarata, Kelaniya, and private sector universities Sri Lanka also produces tourism graduates. Tourism higher education, as a significant platform for the industry's human capital development (Ladkin, 2006).

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that COVID 19 was a global pandemic, indicating the significant global spread of an infectious disease. COVID 19 has impacted tourism in many countries across the world, not only Sri Lanka. During the pandemic, women, youth, and minorities have been disproportionately affected, and the prospect of job loss continues. Without a full recovery of the Travel & Tourism sector, millions of the remaining 272 million jobs, now maintained by government retention plans and reduced hours, might be lost (Oxford Economics, 2021). Lots of employees have lost their jobs in the tourism industry due to the impact of sudden COVID 19 in Sri Lanka. During the pandemic, 36 percent of low skilled workers and 36 percent of semi-skilled workers were laid off. In the tourism industry, over 285 middle and junior level management will lose their job. National Human Resources Development Council (NHRDC) mentioned that, the majority 71 percent of tourism and hospitality specialists and hoteliers, believe that the tourism sector will lose 41 percent to 60 percent of its workforce as a result of this pandemic situation.

With the COVID 19 crisis, anticipated losses, and other challenges plaguing the tourism and hospitality business, it's important to know how potential recruits see the industry now. As a result of these perceptions, the number and quality of future personnel may be influenced. Therefore, this research is focused on comparing the perception of future career selection of Hospitality and Tourism undergraduates towards the tourism industry before and after effects of the COVID 19 pandemic.

1.1 Need of the study

Having a skilled, energetic, and committed team is viewed as critical to the success of tourism and hospitality businesses (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Tourism development strategy 2011-2016 states that the annual production of around 1500 graduates is the requirement of the Sri Lankan Tourism industry. Undergraduates from public and private universities have a high possibility of entering and surviving in the tourism and hospitality sector as educated, skilled, and professional workers.

Numerous researchers have examined how tourism and hospitality undergraduates make decisions based on their career expectations (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Richardson, 2008; Roney, 2007; Wang, 2016). The staff education, training, abilities, and motivation also play a role in gaining a competitive advantage for a company, and their devotion to the tourism industry or firm will determine if the sector can maintain this advantage (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000).

COVID 19 has had an enormously negative influence on human health. Moreover, the economic consequences make it apart from prior crises. The tourism and hospitality industry has stood out as the purveyor and principal inheritor of the epidemic and its effects as industries worldwide are impacted with increasing uncertainty (Hao, Xiao, & Chon, 2020). Studies found that with the pandemic, when evaluating their current and future career strategies in light of the necessities of a dynamic economic system, undergraduates' use a temporal lens (Richardson, 2008).

In the tourism and hospitality industry, it was found that there is a difference in undergraduates' perception of career selection before and after the pandemic. There is an empirical gap because there is only a limited number of publications that have looked into the impact of COVID 19 on tourism undergraduates' future career perceptions in the industry. And also, the previous researcher mentioned that future research could include a longitudinal analysis to examine how undergraduates' selecting a career in the field of tourism evolves over a longer period of pandemics (Siow et al., 2021). As a result, this study aims to fulfill those gaps that have been identified and study the differences in undergraduates' perceptions on career selection in the tourism industry before and after effects of the COVID 19 pandemic in Sri Lanka.

1.2 Objective of the study

- [1] To identify the difference of undergraduates' perception on career selection in the tourism industry before and after effects of COVID 19
- [2] To examine the major factors that caused to make a difference or remained constant in undergraduates' perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry

1.3 Significance of the Study

Significance of the study is undergraduates can learn about the future employment market and demand for future careers in tourism. By assessing existing needs, hoteliers, travel agencies, and other tourism-related stakeholders can forecast future manpower needs, and potential investors can forecast future tourist investment. This research will help organizations understand what attracts students to the tourism industry. This knowledge can help attract, hire, and retain high-potential personnel. The Sri Lankan government can enhance the tourism business by examining vital data and determining how to carry the industry forward after the COVID 19 outbreak. The government can also identify future employment market changes and future tourism labor demands. Its information can be applied to future local and global disruptions, expanding its worth beyond the current circumstances.

Understanding students' viewpoints aids institutions and schools in recruiting students and developing effective courses and industrial training opportunities for students. Undergraduates can get an idea about their future job market and the demand for the future career in the tourism industry. This study gains an advantage to scholars, researchers, and people interested in conducting research based on the career perception of the tourism industry with a pandemic situation. In Sri Lankan context, only a limited number of studies have been conducted on the selected research topic. So, this will be a basement for future researchers who are interested in the tourism industry.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITREATURE

2.1 Tourism and hospitality in Sri Lanka

In the 1960s, Sri Lanka entered the international tourism sector. Since then, this industry has been slowly increasing as a viable area for economic development, despite periodic setbacks such as the Sri Lankan civil and global terrorist attacks and natural disasters (Ranasinghe & Deysappriya, 2010). Sri Lanka is a popular tourist destination with a wide range of activities. Its distinct traits and strategic location are critical to the development of tourism. According to the Ministry of finance planning (2010), the Sri Lankan government has established two key objectives: tourism development and poverty reduction. SLTDA estimated that the tourism and hospitality industry contributed 4.3 percent of Sri Lanka's GDP in 2019. In 2019, tourism was the country's third-largest foreign exchange earner, trailing only worker remittances and textile and apparel (SLTDA, 2019). SLTDA statistical report 2019 mentioned that employment in the tourism industry as 80 percent of direct employment was in hotels and restaurants, travel agencies and tour operators 7 percent, airline 5 percent, guide 3 percent, state sector 2 percent, tourist shops 1 percent, recreational facility agencies 1 percent, and national tour organizations account for 0.5 percent. Purpose of visit to Sri Lanka classified by Department of immigration and emigration as pleasure or vacation 83.2 percent, Business 3.65 percent, Visiting friends & relatives 10.48 percent, MICE 0.99 percent, sports 0.72 percent, health 0.59 percent, education 0.32 percent, religious & culture 0.3 percent, Official 0.1 percent and other 0.1 percent (SLTDA, 2019).

2.2 Tourism and Crises

There have been natural disasters, financial and economic downturns, and political changes on the worldwide level, terrorist attacks, and other epidemics that have had a significant impact on tourist mobility in the past of the industry (Cavlek, 2002; C. M. Hall, 2010). With growing awareness about health risks among visitors, the possibility of exposure to emerging diseases has a significant impact on travel intentions and tourist behavior (Widmar, Dominick, Ruple & Tyner, 2017). In recent years, researchers have looked into the impact of recent epidemics and pandemics on tourist behavior in crisis situations. These have included Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Avian influenza (Bird Flu or H5N1 virus), MERS, Swine Flu (H1N1), Ebola virus, Zika virus, and Nipah virus (Leung & Lam, 2004; Widmar et al., 2017). Tourism has grown rapidly due to improved transportation services, resulting in increasing interconnection, complexity, employment, and state economies. WTTC has justified this argument. Between 2001 and 2018, 36 percent of the 90 crises studied were caused by natural disasters, 32 percent by terrorism/ security difficulties, 19 percent by political unrest, and 13 percent by diseases. In 2001, it took 26 months to recover on average and the longest recovery time is 22.2 months for political instability, followed by 19.4 months for disease outbreaks. Epidemics like H1N1 cost the global economy between USD 45-55 billion and now cost over USD 570 billion (Oxford economies, 2021). Thus, future crises will have a larger global impact (Hall, 2010). To respond to and recover from such crises in the tourism industry, each situation is unique, and effective crisis management processes and implications are required.

2.3 COVID 19 and Sri Lankan Tourism industry

Tourism accounts for the majority of human mobility in the modern world. The threat of finding the first Sri Lankan national tested positive for COVID 19, who was a local patient on 10th March 2020, has brought tourism to a halt in the country (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). Unfortunately, HPB (Health Promotion Bureau) reported that this rapid growth of the Corona virus has resulted in 554459 total confirmed cases and 14072 deaths in Sri Lanka due to COVID 19 pandemic (as at 18th November, 2021 and keep increasing), despite the fact that the virus will controlled and handled by the government's special operations in protecting people from the threat. The global outbreak of COVID 19 impacted negatively on the tourism and hotel industries. However, decisions to restrict the movement of people and goods have mostly impacted industries such as tourism, because of tourism encompasses air, sea, and land transportation as well as food handling, lodging, entertainment, and recreation services. Global travel was disrupted as a result of the pandemic, affecting Sri Lanka's tourism business. In April 2020, Sri Lanka closed its non-essential passenger and domestic borders. In addition, travel is prohibited. According to the SLTDA, the percentage change of monthly tourist arrival in January, February, and March 2020 and 2021 was 99.3, 98.4, and 93.6. Tourism was put on hold indefinitely. Businesses were facing a huge threat to their existence. As a result, workers had to be laid off. This has created a sense of insecurity among both current and future employees. Even after the pandemic has been contained and life has returned to normal on the island, the tourism industry's personnel will continue to receive lower pay for a significant length of time as part of an island wide effort to recover the economy (Arachchi & Gnanapala, 2020).

The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on Sri Lanka tourism can be seen as like, Sri Lanka earns a better reputation than other countries in the world in terms of controlling the pandemic, provision of quarantine and medical facilities, even for foreigners, while other developed countries advise nonresidents to leave and use of personal protective equipment in handling airline and sea line. As a result, even though Sri Lanka Tourism is currently losing money, this circumstance will benefit the industry in the future (Ranasinghe et al., 2020).

2.4 Hospitality and Tourism Undergraduates' Perceptions towards Careers in the Tourism Industry.

There is a persistent scarcity of well-educated workers in the tourism industry (Lu & Adler, 2009). There is a considerable body of research on tourist employment, only a few studies have been undertaken to examine students' attitudes toward professions in the tourism industry. This means that additional empirical research concentrating on tourism students' impressions of the business are necessary to assess the status of tourism jobs in the tourism sector's human resource planning process. Generally, human resource plans prioritize the employment demands of large international tourism corporations, particularly in hospitality, and overlook student perspectives. Negative perceptions toward tourism work may contribute to the industry's inability to recruit and retain the best tourism students. Given the tourism industry's reliance on humans to perform a service, this would have a detrimental effect on service quality and consumer happiness, hence impeding the industry's competitiveness (Roney, 2007). Expansion of the tourism industry leads to an increase in job opportunities. This tendency is reflected in the provision of tourism education, which is tasked with developing an educated and experienced workforce (Gu et al., 2007).

Kusluvan (2000), stated that employees' education, training and skills, and their motivation to work provide a competitive advantage, commitment to work in the sector also contributes to the firm's ability to maintain a competitive edge. This commitment has been defined by employees' views toward work and future industry growth (Shah, Chowdhury, & Gupta, 2021). According to Alder (2009), revealed that the students' most important goals were "having a powerful job" and "making money", both of which are often difficult to achieve in the early stages of a career in tourism and hospitality industry. Students majoring in tourism and hospitality are not failing to enter the business upon graduation and undergraduate hospitality, tourism students are widely sought after by the industry since they are more likely to enter and hold managerial and professional roles (Lu & Adler, 2009). The variable of perceived social status effected on students' perceived outcome expectancies and self-interest, which in turn influenced undergraduates' commitment to their career choice (Wang, 2016). Students are directly involved in their job selection, even when they are concerned and care about the opinions of their family members and friends. If they perceive that jobs in the hospitality and tourism industry are good, valuable, or useful, they are like to show confident intentions (Park et al., 2017).

Most college students do not want to work in low paying jobs for a long time before making their way up (Neequaye & Armoo, 2014). According to Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000), despite the fact that friends and relatives interpreted the tourism and hospitality industry as beneficial and important and were proud of respondents' decision to pursue careers in the industry but undergraduates believed industry workers were undervalued in society. And also with the COVID 19, Students who had not been placed on campus thought it was tough to find work now and that they needed to make new career choices (Shah et al., 2021). Employers and educators should be aware of the expectations of university students and help them create a career in tourism (Lu & Adler, 2009).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population and Sample

A population is any group of people who share one or more characteristics that the researcher is interested in. The population may consist of all individuals of a specific type or a subset of those individuals (Salaria, 2012). A variety of degrees, certifications, and courses have been developed to fill the identified human resource deficit in the accommodation and associated tourism industry services by offering the appropriate training (Wijesundara, 2015). Therefore, Sri Lankan public and private sector institution, in particular, provide tourism industry related degrees, and industry related course to enhance practical expertise while developing the soft skills and providing a wide general education. Thus, this study the population is taken as the hospitality and tourism undergraduates in university education system in Sri Lanka.

The sample of this study was the 4th year Hospitality and Tourism undergraduates utilizing a mix of both government and private universities in Sri Lanka. Due to the study's emphasis on students about to enter the field, only final-year students of hospitality, tourism, and hotel management were chosen. The study is conducted with 20 respondents of final year undergraduates of the Hospitality and Tourism degree program in both government and private universities in Sri Lanka. The research is aim to investigate perceptions of one single group of people that have similar characteristics. Therefore, the Homogenous Purposive sampling technique is employed to select as a sampling technique. According to the American Psychological Association, this method of sampling is employed when the frequency of the behavior or feature of interest is so low in the population that a more targeted technique is required to recruit a significant number of participants for the research. The strength of this method of sampling is in its ability to select examples with a wealth of information for in-depth examination in relation to the core themes being addressed. The purposive sampling technique utilized in this study is homogenous sampling, as the survey's objective is to elicit information about the perceptions of a single group with comparable features in order to fully define that group (Richardson, 2008).

3.2 Data and Sources of Data

This research primary data is collected from the 4th year hospitality and tourism undergraduates of both government and public universities. Their perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry before and after the COVID 19 outbreak were obtained through structured interviews with open-ended questions. Secondary data is obtained for this study from books, research articles, newspapers, magazines, journals, and the internet in order to gain a general understanding of the selected research problem.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, it is mainly based on primary data obtained via direct interviews and zoom platform interviews with fourth-year tourism and hospitality undergraduates in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. The direct interview is the most appropriate approach for obtaining detailed information about the objectives, and interviews via the zoom platform are the most convenient under this kind of pandemic situation. This research interview guide included general questions to determine the profiles of the interviewees, as well as the major two sections of the guide illustrating questions within the study objectives, which were divided into two categories. There were 9 questions covering the both before and after perception of the respondents to cover the first research objective and 30 statements were the third section to cover the second research objective. The first section of the interview guide was focused on gathering basic demographic information on the undergraduates who were being interviewed. The second section of the interview guidelines focused on undergraduates' perception to work in the tourism industry before and after effects of the pandemic. And the third section was focused on how the interviewees prioritized the 30 assertions in order of importance based on their perception of tourism sector career selection. To evaluate the consistency of the interview guide with the research objectives, it was validated and improved with the responses and comments.

Structured in depth interviews were selected as the data collection method because they are compatible with the study's main two objectives. On average, interviews last between 20 and 40 minutes, depending on the subject of the interview. Before the interview began, the researcher presented the research topic, the background of the study, and the objective of the interview to the respondents in order to provide them with as much information as possible about the research. Based on the preferences and convenience of the interviewee in order to express his or her concept effectively, the interviews were performed in English. With permission responses were recorded, and each audio file was stored and transcribed. The four respondents were not allowed to record their opinions. The recorded interviews were used to transcribe the responses of the respondents, which was important for

including relevant quotes in the thesis report, and all 20 interviews were transcribed, created excel sheets, and the analysis was made. The important ideas of the respondents were highlighted utilizing the notebook.

3.3 Theoretical framework

According to the author Cassell & Symon, (2004), thematic analysis is a valuable method for examining the views of various research participants, showing parallels and differences, and providing unexpected findings. Thematic analysis is particularly beneficial for summarizing significant elements of a huge data set since it requires the researcher to handle data in a well-structured manner, resulting in a clear and well-organized final report. The most generally used methodology for conducting thematic analysis is a six-step procedure that includes familiarizing oneself with the data, developing initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing themes, defining and labeling themes, and publishing the report.

The researcher employed the systematic consensus building analysis method by using data matrix to analyze the research's second objective. Matrices comprise verbal data, quotes, summarized text, notes, memoranda, standardized responses, and, in general, data that is organized around a logical idea or research issue. Matrixes, in general, include information on and explain parts of study, and they enable the researcher to acquire a quick overview of data relevant to a specific issue

Table 3.1: Data analyzing methods

Objectives	Analysis Methods
To identify the difference of undergraduates' perception on career selection in the tourism industry before and after effects of COVID 19	Thematic analysis
To examine the major factors that caused to make a difference or remained constant in undergraduates' perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry	Systematic consensus-building analysis

Source: Developed by the researcher (2022)

Therefore, the transcripts created from interview recordings are utilized to summarize and complete the obtained data in an Excel sheet. All transcripts are taken into account in order to get a general idea about the objectives. The first objective of this research study was manually evaluated by using thematic analysis, which aids in the formation of parent themes, and sub themes utilizing transcripts. The study's second objective was to use an excel sheet and calculate the numerical values of the respondents' votes for each factors. Finally, analyze the most influencing factors and least influencing factors that contributed to the difference in respondents' perceptions of tourism industry career selection.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Objective One: To identify the difference of undergraduates' perception on career selection in the tourism industry before and after effects of COVID 19

The first research objective is to identify the difference of undergraduates' perception on career selection in the tourism industry before and after effects of COVID 19. The researcher divided the four main themes based on the interviewee's responses to related questions, and sub themes were created under each of the four main themes. The research investigated a difference of undergraduates' perception before and after effects of the pandemic. The information provided by the interviews was primarily used as a basis for the analysis, findings, recommendations, and ultimate the conclusion. Their findings are based on difference perceptions of tourism job selection before to and after the pandemic, from four primary perspectives: future expectations, nature of work, contextual influence, and pay and benefits. The researcher generated the themes based on the responses of the participants. The research objective was divided into themes, and the data sets acquired were examined.

Table 4.1: Summary of the themes for first objective

	Parent Themes	Sub Themes
Objective one	1. Future expectation of career selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job security • Social recognition • Career progression • Personal development • Promotional opportunities
	2. Nature of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working environment • Duties and responsibilities • Working schedules
	3. Contextual influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents and family • Uncertainty in the industry • Society influence
	4. Pay and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salary • Fringe benefits

Source: Survey data (2022)

The findings of this study show that undergraduates' perceptions of career selection differed before and after the pandemic. Furthermore, respondents have a more positive perception regarding the tourism industry career selection before the pandemic than after the pandemic. However, after the pandemic, respondents had a negative perception of tourism career selection rather than a positive perception.

Undergraduates had a negative perception after the COVID 19 of future expectation of tourism career selection instead of positive perception. According to the findings, many Sri Lankan tourism students had a negative perception of their future careers

in the industry, whereas students had a positive perception about job security before the pandemic. Some of the findings are quite relevant to the current situation. Previous research, unlike this one, Kumar (2018) had showed that employment in the industry gave job security. The researcher found no difference in perceptions of social recognition before and after the pandemic. Respondents in both instances have negative perceptions, and students indicated that the pandemic provides a complement to negative social recognition. Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000) founded that same results like, students believed that working in tourism was a low-status occupation. The students had a positive perception of the tourism industry as a career progression. However, after the pandemic, there was a difference in their perceptions; government respondents desired to see their careers progress in a different industry. Despite the fact that private university respondents had a different perception than government respondents, they nevertheless had a positive perception. They anticipate a quick recovery from the pandemic. According to Richardson (2008), students are more likely to believe that a career progression in the industry is possible. There was a significant difference in respondents' perceptions of personal development before and after the pandemic's effects. They planned personal development through tourism careers before to the pandemic, but after COVID, they switched to new opportunities. Higher education was an attractive choice, but many thought that they needed to look beyond the sector and concentrate on studies, other associated certification and diploma courses, family enterprises, and in some cases, government competitive exam preparation. But Benaraba et al. (2022) argued that, Students feel constantly that the tourism industry aids in the professional and personal development of its employees during the pandemic. Respondents believe that the tourism industry's promotion prospects are insufficient (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). According to the study findings, both before and after the pandemic, undergraduates had a negative perception of promotional opportunities in tourism careers. Shah et al. (2021) also found that, students were aware that after the outbreak, there was a small probability of promotions in the tourism industry.

One of the most common factors students take into account when making career decisions is the availability of a healthy and safe work environment. It is believed that a positive work atmosphere encourages people to achieve their full potential while also allowing them to enjoy their jobs (Achim, Badrolhisam, & Zulkipli, 2019). Before to the pandemic, undergraduates had a positive perception of the tourism industry's working environment. However, after the pandemic, their perception was different than before, and they had a negative perception. Respondents believed that in the case of a pandemic, the industry must provide a safe working environment for its employees. Students believe that the industry's workload and responsibilities are unreasonable (Richardson, 2009). The findings of the study also revealed that undergraduates had negative perceptions of the industry's responsibilities and duties both before and after the pandemic. Undergraduates noted that because of the COVID crisis, employees are expected to bear more responsibilities than in the past, yet they are not compensated for their work. Working hours are excessively lengthy, and the nature of the work load has a severe impact on family life (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Richardson (2008), also found that their jobs were hard and that maintaining a work-life balance was challenging. Study results proved that literatures, respondents showed their negative perception towards the working schedule in the industry both before and after the pandemic. Respondents stated that COVID 19 impacted for heavy work load to the industry jobs.

Undergraduates had a negative perception of the influence of context on their job selection, and there was no noticeable difference in their perceptions before and after the pandemic. After the pandemic, respondents' perceptions were significantly impacted by their parents, society, and industrial uncertainty. Before to the pandemic's effects, undergraduates' parents and families had a strong influence on their job selection in tourism. Unfortunately, it was changed after the pandemic. Future crises and industrial preparedness were a point of anxiety for undergraduates. Researchers stated that, students are concerned about the responses of their family to their work selection (Park et al., 2017).

The majority of human resource literature considers pay and benefits to be part of employee motivation. This is another factor that students consider while considering a future job in the tourism industry. The undergraduates' perceptions of the tourism industry's pay and benefits were positive before the pandemic, according to the findings. Kumar (2018) stated that, students had a positive perception regarding salary. But Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000) and Richardson (2009) argued that, negative perceptions existed, with respondents believing that the tourism jobs paid less and had insufficient fringe benefits. Study finding showed that, the majority of students believed that because of the layoffs during the pandemic, current job opportunities would face increased competition, resulting in reduced salary and benefits. Respondents felt that the pay in the industry jobs was insufficient, particularly in this type of risky environment. Students believed that the pandemic will have an influence on wages and benefits related with jobs (Shah et al., 2021).

4.2 Objective Two: To examine the major factors that caused to make a difference or remained constant in undergraduates' perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry

The second objective of the research is to highlight the major factors that caused to make a difference or remained constant in undergraduates' perception of tourism industry career selection. By referencing existing literatures, the researcher identified 30 factors that influenced to the undergraduates' career selection in tourism industry. The researcher asked interviewees to rank each factor in order of importance when it decided to selecting a tourism career. After compiling all of the interviewees' responses, examine the data using the data matrix. Following that, the researcher found the most and least important factors that make difference on undergraduates' perceptions of tourism industry career selection. For the purpose of ranking thirty selected factors, regardless of the type of organization, whether they are private or government universities. By analyzing the data matrix's results, it became evident which factors have the most and least influence on undergraduates' perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry.

According to the research, the most influential factor affecting undergraduates' perceptions of career selection was a good starting salary for tourism careers. It received 82 points of all votes and was the most of respondents' first choice. Richardson (2010) discovered that, a good starting salary for tourism jobs was a critical influence in students' career decision. Thus, the study's findings justified that result. Undergraduates believed that careers in tourism provided opportunities for travel abroad. Here as result, it became the second most influential factor in selecting on a tourism career, and scoring a total of 92 points. The research found a total significant difference of 10 points between the first and second most influential factors in tourism career selection. The third most influential factor in undergraduates' career selection was the level of fringe benefits offered by tourism careers, such as tips, bonuses, leisure, holidays, uniforms, food and beverage, and transportation. It had a total of 141 points from respondents voting.

And when compared to the second most influential factor, there was not a significant difference in results, with a difference of only 49 points. The previous researcher Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000) argued that, the level of fringe benefits provided to tourism jobs was insufficient. Job mobility in tourism careers was the fourth major influence factor in tourism career selection. Respondents believed that finding another job in the tourism industry is simple. It received a total of 160 points. And there was a difference of only 19 points between the third selected factors. Job mobility is a most critical and important component in both domestic and international students' career choices in tourism (Richardson, 2010). The fifth most influential factor in tourism industry career selection was that tourism industry careers promote employee health and positive mindset. It scored 185 points from the respondents' total. When compared to the first factor, it revealed a 103 point difference.

Table 4.2: Most influencing factors for tourism industry career selection

Five most influencing factors for tourism career selection	Total Score
Tourism industry careers have a good starting salary.	82
Tourism industry careers provide opportunities to travel abroad.	92
The level of fringe benefits (tips, bonuses, leisure, holidays, uniforms, food and beverage, transportation, etc.) are given to employees in the tourism industry.	141
There is job mobility (easy to get a job anywhere) in tourism industry careers.	160
Tourism industry careers promote good health and a positive mindset among employees.	185

Source: Survey data (2022)

The data matrix indicated which factors had the least impact on undergraduates' perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry. The least influential factor in selecting a tourism career is job security. The study's findings clearly indicated that the majority of respondents chose "there is job security in the tourism industry careers" as the last consideration. It received 586 of the total points. When compared to the most influencing factor, respondents' perceptions differed by 504 points. Shah et al. (2021) discovered that, students reported less job security in industry careers as a result of the COVID 19 epidemic. Previous research also proved the same results that job security of the tourism careers (Benaraba et al., 2022; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Richardson, 2010; Roney, 2007). The second least influential factor in selecting on a tourism career was "respect and pride received when working in the tourism industry." Undergraduates believed that industry careers had not enough social status. As a result, it earned a total of 535 points. When compared to the job security there was only 51 score difference. Additionally, past research found that students had a negative perceptions toward social status of industry careers (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). The third least factor in selecting a tourism career was "there is no sexual discrimination in the tourism industry." Respondents believed that sexual discrimination exists in industry careers, as evidenced by their 521 lowest scores, which were differed by only 14 points of social position. "Tourism industry related careers associated with low risk" was the fourth least selected factor, with a total score of 516. It was only a five-point difference from the factor for sexual discrimination. According to respondents' ranking, the fifth least factor in selecting a tourism career was "tourism industry careers have flexible working hours in comparing to other careers." It was a total of 429 points. As a result, undergraduates assumed that jobs in industry did not have flexible work hours. Studies revealed that there was a long and irregular working hours in tourism careers (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Roney, 2007; Shah et al., 2021; Wijesundara, 2015).

Table 4.3: Least important factors for tourism industry career selection

Five least influencing factors for tourism career selection	Total score
There is job security in the tourism industry careers.	586
Respect and pride is received when working in the tourism industry.	535
There is no sexual discrimination in the tourism industry careers.	521
Tourism industry related careers associated with low risk	516
Tourism industry careers have flexible working hours when comparing to other careers.	429

Source: Survey data (2022)

V. CONCLUSION

Using a qualitative research design, the required information was gathered through structured in-depth interviews with Sri Lankan tourism undergraduates in their final year of study at government and private universities. Two research objectives were defined to effectively define the study. The material acquired from the interviews was analyzed using four key themes: future expectation of career selection, the nature of the work, contextual influence, and pay and benefits. These themes were investigated using thematic analysis to determine the final study outcomes for the first research objective, whilst systematic consensus building analysis was used to analyze the second objective. Using the interview data, a data matrix was developed in Microsoft Excel 2013 and results related to the second objective were generated.

The first objective was to determine if there was a difference between undergraduates' perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry before and after the COVID 19 pandemic. According to the findings of the study, undergraduates perceive the tourism industry as one of the most severely impacted industries by the COVID-19 pandemic. They described the tourism industry as having numerous business closures, nil income, travel restrictions, significant front-line employee layoffs, lower compensation, negative social recognition, and no job security. Respondents also stated that the industry's recovery would take a considerable amount of time, which makes them anxious about their future employment opportunities. Nonetheless, responses from a few private universities diverged. It was discovered that they are still confident of a speedier recovery and that the sector will undertake certain crisis prevention measures and their job interests remained focused on main hotel operational departments. Before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, undergraduates' career perceptions differed significantly, according to the research. In addition, when selecting a career in tourism, undergraduates were more concerned with their parents and society. After the pandemic, parents and society had a completely demoralizing effect on their decision to pursue a career in tourism. Nonetheless, undergraduates reported that industry workers lacked adequate procedures to prevent coronavirus infections. In addition, after this pandemic of uncertainty

and confusion, the students view their career opportunities in the tourism sector. Lastly, the majority of respondents considered alternatives such as a career in a different field, starting up their own business, continuing their higher education, migrating, taking competitive exams, and pursuing other opportunities outside the tourism industry.

The second objective is to examine the major factors that caused or remained constant to influence undergraduates' perceptions of career selection in the tourism industry. According to the data, a good starting salary was the most crucial element in selecting on a tourism career. According to the respondents, the opportunity to travel abroad, the level of fringe benefits, job mobility, and tourism careers promoting good health and a positive mindset of employees were the other most influential factors. Respondents from private universities, on the other hand had a preference for industry employment that provided the opportunity to travel abroad. "There is employment security in careers in the tourism industry" was the least influential factor in undergraduates' decisions to enter the industry. As a result of the pandemic, a large number of students consider that a career in tourism is not secure. Negative social recognition, sexual discrimination in tourism careers, career-associated risks, and long working hours were also ranked as the least important by respondents when selecting a career within the tourism industry. And the findings indicated that tourism undergraduates have adequate knowledge of the tourism industrial environment.

The recovery of the tourism sector will influence the future trends of career prospects of these undergraduates in a meaningful way. The industry has to put in place concrete steps aimed at addressing the issues of job security, health and safety, and a conducive atmosphere for progressive career development in order to win back potential employees.

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