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Exploring the Determinants of Tourism and Hospitality Career Choice among Undergraduate Students: A Study of South Indian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The tourism and hospitality sector plays a significant role in generating employment, fostering economic growth, facilitating cultural exchange, and promoting regional development. Despite the increasing career prospects within this field, it still encounters difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled young graduates. Undergraduate students constitute a vital potential talent reservoir for tourism and hospitality enterprises; however, their inclination to pursue this sector as a long-term career is affected by various personal, educational, social, and industry-specific factors. This research investigates the elements that influence the career choices of undergraduate students enrolled in universities in South India within the tourism and hospitality domain. The focus of the study is on students' perceptions regarding career opportunities, remuneration and benefits, job stability, prospects for career progression, workplace environment, social standing, work-life balance, influences from parents and peers, educational experiences, and internship opportunities. The aim is to comprehend how these factors shape students' attitudes and intentions towards careers in tourism and hospitality. A structured research framework is proposed to analyze the correlation between career-related factors and students' intentions regarding career choices. The anticipated outcomes of this study will offer valuable insights for universities, educators in hospitality, tourism organizations, recruiters, and policymakers who aim to attract young talent to the industry. Additionally, the findings may aid in curriculum development, collaboration between industry and academia, career counseling, internship programs, and enhancement of employment practices.

KEYWORDS *: Tourism Careers, Hospitality Careers, Undergraduate Students, Career Choice, Employability, South India.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism and hospitality are vital elements of the modern service economy, playing a crucial role in job creation, entrepreneurial ventures, regional growth, foreign exchange revenue, and cultural exchange. This sector includes a wide array of activities such as accommodation, food and beverage services, travel agencies, tour operations, transportation, event management, destination management, recreation, cruise tourism, wellness tourism, and various related services. The ongoing growth and diversification of tourism markets have generated numerous job opportunities for graduates equipped with expertise in hospitality management, tourism administration, travel management, culinary operations, event management, and similar fields. Nevertheless, the existence of job opportunities does not necessarily mean that students are inclined to pursue tourism and hospitality as their chosen career path. Undergraduate students find themselves at a crucial juncture in their career development. During this phase, they assess various professional options based on their interests, skills, educational backgrounds, family expectations, financial goals, and perceptions of future job prospects.

Consequently, career selection is not merely an individual choice but a complex process shaped by both personal and environmental influences. In the context of tourism and hospitality, students may consider the appeal of the sector in terms of salary, job stability, advancement opportunities, international exposure, working conditions, occupational status, work-life balance, and chances for personal growth. One significant factor influencing career choice is how students perceive the tourism and hospitality sector. Favorable views on job opportunities, career advancement, creativity, global mobility, and interpersonal interactions can motivate students to view this field as a desirable career path. In contrast, negative perceptions related to extended working hours, unpredictable schedules, relatively low entry-level salaries, job-related stress, seasonal work, demanding clientele, and a lack of work-life balance may deter students from pursuing careers in this industry. Thus, it is crucial to comprehend how students assess the pros and cons of careers in tourism and hospitality to effectively tackle workforce challenges. The educational setting also significantly impacts career aspirations. Higher education institutions equip students with theoretical insights, hands-on training, internships, site visits, workshops, seminars, and chances to engage with industry experts. These experiences can shape students' perceptions of real-world work environments and career opportunities. Students who gain substantial industry exposure are likely to build greater confidence in their professional skills and may be more inclined to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality. Conversely, insufficient practical experience may lead to unrealistic expectations or doubts regarding career opportunities. Career advancement opportunities are a crucial factor to consider. Students tend to favor industries that offer clear paths for career growth and the chance to take on managerial and leadership roles. The tourism and hospitality sectors provide various career trajectories across departments such as front office, food and beverage, housekeeping, sales and marketing, human resources, revenue management, events, and operations. Additionally, international hospitality chains can offer prospects for geographical mobility and cross-cultural professional experiences. Effectively communicating these career pathways to students may increase the sector's appeal. The work environment and work-life balance are also becoming increasingly important in the career choices of undergraduates. Employment in tourism and hospitality often necessitates working during weekends, holidays, evenings, and extended shifts. Employees in customer-facing roles may face occupational stress due to high service expectations and the need to handle complaints and service failures. Consequently, younger graduates may compare careers in tourism and hospitality with other sectors that are perceived to offer more flexibility and predictable work schedules. To attract young professionals, organizations must address these perceptions by implementing employee-friendly policies, offering flexible work arrangements when possible, providing supportive management, and creating opportunities for career advancement. Family and social influence can also affect career selection. Parents, relatives, teachers, friends, and social networks may influence students' perceptions of occupational prestige and career stability.

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In some communities, careers in tourism and hospitality may be viewed positively because of their international exposure and employment potential, while in others they may be perceived as less prestigious than careers in banking, information technology, government services, engineering, medicine, or management. Such social perceptions can significantly shape students' career aspirations even when they personally possess an interest in tourism and hospitality. The South Indian context provides an especially relevant setting for examining these issues. States such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana possess diverse tourism resources, including heritage destinations, beaches, hill stations, pilgrimage centres, wildlife areas, wellness destinations, cultural attractions, metropolitan business hubs, and culinary traditions. Cities such as Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, Madurai, Coimbatore, and Mysuru have substantial hospitality and tourism activities. The region therefore provides considerable opportunities for students pursuing tourism and hospitality education. Simultaneously, students pursuing tourism and hospitality in South India encounter a competitive job market. Graduates may find opportunities in hotels, resorts, restaurants, travel agencies, airlines, cruise lines, event management, tourism boards, destination management firms, and new digital tourism ventures. The rise of technology-driven tourism, online travel services, artificial intelligence, digital marketing, revenue management systems, and smart tourism has broadened the spectrum of potential career paths. As a result, students' career choices may increasingly hinge on their perception of tourism and hospitality as technologically advanced, professionally fulfilling, and capable of offering sustainable long-term employment. Another important factor is employability and skill enhancement. Employers are progressively looking for graduates who possess strong communication skills, digital literacy, foreign language proficiency, problem-solving abilities, cultural sensitivity, customer service skills, leadership qualities, and adaptability. Students who believe that a tourism and hospitality education equips them with these transferable skills are more likely to opt for this sector. Consequently, universities bear a significant responsibility to ensure that their academic programs are aligned with the evolving demands of the industry. The connection between attitudes and career intentions is crucial for comprehending career selection. Students might possess a favorable attitude towards tourism yet still be reluctant to pursue it due to worries about salary or job stability. Likewise, students may acknowledge job prospects but harbor negative feelings about working conditions. Thus, career selection should be analyzed from various perspectives rather than relying solely on a single indicator of industry appeal. This study, therefore, aims to identify and assess the key factors that affect the career choices in tourism and hospitality among undergraduate students in South Indian universities. It takes into account economic, professional, educational, social, and occupational influences that may shape students' intentions. By systematically investigating these factors, the study seeks to pinpoint the elements that either motivate or deter students from entering the tourism and hospitality sector. The results are anticipated to be beneficial for higher education institutions, tourism and hospitality departments, industry employers, professional associations, career counselors, and policymakers. Universities can leverage these findings to enhance curriculum development, internship programs, industry engagement, and career counseling services. Hospitality organizations will gain insights into the expectations of potential employees, enabling them to formulate effective recruitment and retention strategies. Policymakers can utilize the findings to bolster tourism employment initiatives and foster partnerships between industry and academia. Ultimately, to attract skilled graduates, the tourism and hospitality sector must effectively communicate its career opportunities while also enhancing employment conditions and professional development pathways. Therefore, comprehending undergraduate students' perceptions and the factors influencing their career intentions is a crucial step toward cultivating a motivated, skilled, and sustainable workforce in the tourism and hospitality sector in South India.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The tourism and hospitality sector offers significant employment prospects for graduates; however, attracting young and qualified individuals continues to be a notable challenge. While undergraduate students may have an

understanding of the industry, they often hesitate to choose tourism and hospitality as a long-term career due to concerns about salary, job security, working hours, work-life balance, social status, career advancement, and working conditions. Conversely, positive aspects such as international exposure, professional development, skill enhancement, entrepreneurship, and a variety of job opportunities can motivate career choices. In South India, where tourism resources and hospitality enterprises are rapidly growing, it is crucial to comprehend these opposing influences. Nonetheless, there is a necessity to systematically investigate the factors that shape undergraduate students' career intentions across South Indian universities. Therefore, this study aims to explore the economic, educational, social, professional, and occupational factors that affect students' decisions to pursue a career in tourism and hospitality.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate undergraduate students' views on tourism and hospitality as a potential career path.
2. To identify the key personal, educational, economic, social, and occupational factors that affect students' intentions to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality.
3. To evaluate how salary, job security, opportunities for career advancement, work environment, and work-life balance impact students' career decisions.
4. To examine the influence of educational exposure, internships, industry engagement, and career counseling on fostering students' interest in tourism and hospitality professions.
5. To explore the connection between students' perceptions of the tourism and hospitality sector and their desire to pursue it as a career.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are undergraduate students' views regarding tourism and hospitality as a potential career path?
2. What key factors affect undergraduate students' decisions to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality?
3. In what ways do salary, job security, and opportunities for career advancement, work environment, and work-life balance impact students' career decisions?
4. How do educational experiences, internships, industry engagement, and career counseling shape students' interest in careers within tourism and hospitality?
5. Is there a significant correlation between students' perceptions of tourism and hospitality and their intention to enter the industry as a profession?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Goh and Lee (2022) investigated how internship experiences influence the career intentions of hospitality students. Their results revealed that favorable internship experiences enhanced students' confidence, professional identity, and their eagerness to seek employment in the hospitality sector. The study advocated for stronger partnerships between educational institutions and hospitality organizations.

Jang and Park (2023) analyzed students' views on hospitality employment in light of recent changes in the tourism industry. Their research indicated that job security and organizational stability have become particularly significant factors in students' career choices. The authors recommended that hospitality employers enhance employment stability and more effectively communicate opportunities for career advancement.

Han, Hsu, and Sheu (2024) examined the career intentions of hospitality students amid technological advancements. Their findings indicated that digitalization, artificial intelligence, and smart hospitality are reshaping perceptions of careers in the hospitality field. Students who viewed technology as a source of new professional opportunities expressed a heightened interest in the industry.

Reddy and Kumar (2025) investigated the career preferences of hospitality students in India, identifying employment security, salary, organizational culture, and promotion opportunities as key factors. Their study suggested enhancing campus recruitment and fostering partnerships between industry and academia to better the students' views on hospitality careers.

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2025) reiterated the considerable impact of Travel & Tourism on global economic activity and job creation. The employment potential within this sector presents significant opportunities for recent graduates. Nevertheless, challenges such as workforce development, skills shortages, and the appeal of tourism-related jobs persist.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	68	45.3
Female	80	53.3
Others	2	1.4
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation

According to the table, 53.3% of the respondents are female, 45.3% are male, and 1.4% belong to other gender classifications. This relatively equitable representation offers a valuable opportunity to investigate perceptions among diverse gender groups.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18–19 years	42	28.0
20–21 years	71	47.3
22–23 years	31	20.7
Above 23 years	6	4.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation

Almost half of the participants (47.3%) fall within the age range of 20 to 21 years. This suggests that the sample predominantly consists of undergraduate students who are nearing the point of making significant career choices.

Table 3: Area of Study

Programme	Frequency	Percentage
Tourism Management	35	23.3
Hotel/Hospitality Management	45	30.0
Business/Management	28	18.7
Arts & Humanities	22	14.7
Other Programmes	20	13.3
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation

Students pursuing hospitality management represent the largest demographic at 30%, while those studying tourism management account for 23.3%. The participation of students from various other fields enables the research to encompass a wider range of perspectives on careers in tourism and hospitality.

Table 4: Awareness of Career Opportunities in Tourism and Hospitality

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very High	31	20.7
High	57	38.0
Moderate	43	28.7
Low	15	10.0
Very Low	4	2.6
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation

A total of 58.7% of participants indicate a high or very high level of awareness regarding career opportunities in tourism and hospitality. Conversely, 12.6% express low or very low awareness, highlighting the necessity for enhanced career counseling and industry-focused awareness initiatives.

Table 5: Major Factors Influencing Career Choice

Factor	Respondents	Percentage
Career growth	123	82.0
Salary and benefits	119	79.3
Job security	114	76.0
International opportunities	106	70.7
Work environment	102	68.0
Work-life balance	99	66.0
Internship experience	94	62.7
Family influence	72	48.0
Peer influence	59	39.3

Interpretation

Career advancement is recognized as the primary factor, cited by 82% of participants. Compensation and benefits follow closely in second place at 79.3%, with job security ranking third at 76%. International opportunities hold significance as well, with 70.7% of respondents acknowledging their impact. In contrast, the influence of peers seems to be relatively less significant.

Table 6: Students' Perception of Tourism and Hospitality Careers

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Statement	Mean	SD
Tourism and hospitality offers diverse career opportunities	4.12	0.82
The sector provides opportunities for career growth	3.98	0.91
Tourism careers provide international exposure	4.06	0.86
Hospitality is a professionally rewarding career	3.72	0.98
Tourism and hospitality provides adequate salary opportunities	3.41	1.02
The sector provides good job security	3.18	1.08
Hospitality offers a good work-life balance	2.94	1.11
Overall, tourism and hospitality is an attractive career	3.76	0.94

Interpretation

Students exhibit a notably favorable view of career diversity (Mean = 4.12) and international exposure (Mean = 4.06). Conversely, their perceptions of job security (Mean = 3.18) and work-life balance (Mean = 2.94) are relatively less positive. This indicates that while students acknowledge the opportunities present in the sector, they still harbor concerns regarding employment conditions.

Table 7: Internship Experience and Career Intention

Internship Experience	Strong Career Intention	Moderate	Weak	Total
Positive	48	17	5	70
Neutral	20	19	8	47
Negative	8	12	13	33
Total	76	48	26	150

Interpretation

Among students who reported favourable internship experiences, 48 exhibit strong career aspirations. Conversely, merely 8 students with unfavourable internship experiences show strong career intentions. This suggests that hands-on experience may significantly influence students' readiness to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality.

Table 8: Preferred Career Sector

Career Sector	Frequency	Percentage
Tourism & Hospitality	52	34.7
Banking/Finance	27	18.0
IT/Technology	31	20.7
Government/ Public Sector	24	16.0
Entrepreneurship	16	10.6
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation

Tourism and hospitality is the favored career sector for 34.7% of respondents, making it the largest category. Nevertheless, around two-thirds of students lean towards other sectors, highlighting the necessity for the tourism and hospitality industry to enhance its appeal to undergraduate talent.

Table 9: Overall Career Intention

Career Intention	Frequency	Percentage
Very Strong	35	23.3
Strong	42	28.0
Moderate	43	28.7
Weak	21	14.0
Very Weak	9	6.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation

A total of 51.3% of participants express strong or very strong intentions to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality. In contrast, 28.7% are undecided, indicating a significant number of individuals whose career aspirations could be positively shaped through

effective career counselling, internships, and exposure to the industry.

Table 10: Ranking of Career Choice Determinants

Rank	Determinant	Mean Score
1	Career advancement opportunities	4.18
2	Salary and benefits	4.09
3	Job security	4.02
4	International exposure	3.96
5	Work environment	3.91
6	Skill development	3.87
7	Internship experience	3.81
8	Social recognition	3.52
9	Family influence	3.31
10	Peer influence	2.98

Interpretation

Career advancement holds the top position with a mean score of 4.18, indicating that students have a strong interest in long-term professional growth. Following this, salary and benefits are ranked second, with job security coming in third. Peer influence has the lowest mean score, implying that individual career factors are more significant than the pressure from peers.

Table 11: Relationship between Career Perception and Career Intention

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance
Career Perception ↔ Career Intention	0.684	< 0.001

Interpretation

A correlation coefficient of 0.684 suggests a robust positive association between students' views on tourism and hospitality careers and their desire to enter the field. This relationship is statistically significant at the 1% level. Consequently, students who hold more positive perceptions are likely to exhibit a greater intention to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality.

OVERALL FINDINGS

The analysis produces the following major findings:

1. A total of 51.3% of students exhibit strong or very strong intentions to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality.
2. The primary factor influencing career choice is career advancement, which has a mean score of 4.18.
3. Salary and benefits rank as the second most significant consideration, with a mean score of 4.09.
4. Job security is another critical concern, achieving a mean score of 4.02.
5. Students hold particularly favorable views regarding career diversity and international exposure.
6. Among the key occupational characteristics, work-life balance receives the lowest perception score, highlighting a considerable concern for students.
7. Positive experiences during internships correlate with stronger intentions to enter the industry.
8. There exists a strong positive correlation between career perception and career intention ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.001$).
9. The regression analysis indicates that the chosen determinants account for 57.2% of the variance in career intention.
10. The results imply that tourism and hospitality organizations should focus on promoting career advancement, competitive salaries, job security, professional development, a positive workplace culture, and valuable internship opportunities to attract undergraduate talent.

SUGGESTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance Career Advancement Opportunities: Organizations within the tourism and hospitality sectors should effectively communicate the potential for career growth from entry-level roles to supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions. Clearly defined career pathways can bolster students' confidence in choosing this industry as a long-term career.
2. Improve Compensation and Employee Benefits: Given that salary is a significant factor influencing career decisions, employers ought to offer

competitive starting salaries, performance-based incentives, insurance coverage, accommodation assistance, and other welfare benefits whenever possible.

3. Increase Job Security: Hospitality organizations should mitigate the perception of job instability by providing clear employment contracts, structured career advancement, and opportunities for permanent positions contingent on performance.
4. Foster Industry-Academia Partnerships: Universities should forge stronger collaborations with hotels, resorts, travel agencies, airlines, tourism boards, event management firms, and destination management organizations to give students direct access to job opportunities.
5. Enhance Internship Programs: Internship programs should focus on meaningful educational outcomes rather than merely routine tasks. Students should benefit from mentoring, departmental rotations, performance evaluations, and certificates that validate their skills and experiences.
6. Bolster Career Counseling: Universities should conduct regular career counseling sessions featuring hospitality professionals, alumni, and recruiters. Students should be made aware of the diverse career paths available beyond conventional hotel operations.
7. Tackle Work-Life Balance Issues: Employers in the hospitality sector should consider implementing flexible scheduling, sufficient staffing, predictable shifts, weekly rest days, and wellness initiatives to alleviate negative perceptions regarding working conditions.
8. Incorporate Emerging Technologies: The curricula for tourism and hospitality should integrate elements such as artificial intelligence, digital marketing, revenue management, data analytics, smart tourism, online travel platforms, and hospitality technology. This integration can illustrate that the sector provides career opportunities that are relevant to current technological advancements.
9. Cultivate Industry-Relevant Skills: Universities ought to prioritize the development of skills in communication, foreign languages, customer relationship management, leadership, problem-solving, digital literacy, and intercultural competencies, in addition to theoretical knowledge.
10. Enhance Awareness of International Career Opportunities: Educational institutions and industry associations should work to increase awareness regarding international hotels, cruise tourism, airlines, destination management, and overseas employment opportunities within the hospitality sector.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The research titled "Exploring the Determinants of Tourism and Hospitality Career Choice among Undergraduate Students: A Study of South Indian Universities" reveals that the choices made by students regarding careers in tourism and hospitality are influenced by a mix of economic, professional, educational, and occupational factors. The analysis, which included 150 respondents, shows that undergraduate students generally perceive the tourism and hospitality sector as an industry that offers a variety of employment opportunities, international exposure, and avenues for professional growth. Nevertheless, favorable views on career prospects are accompanied by concerns about job security, compensation, and work-life balance. Among the factors analyzed, opportunities for career advancement were identified as the most significant, followed by salary and benefits, as well as job security. This suggests that students are not only looking for immediate job placements; they are also increasingly assessing whether careers in tourism and hospitality can offer sustainable and fulfilling long-term prospects. The emphasis on career progression indicates that organizations must clearly illustrate how employees can advance from entry-level roles to supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions. Additionally, the findings underscore the significance of internships and practical exposure to the industry. Students who had positive internship experiences exhibited a stronger inclination to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality. This underscores the vital role that universities and industry organizations play in facilitating meaningful experiential learning. Well-structured internships can bridge the gap between

academic knowledge and real-world applications, while also aiding students in building professional confidence and acquiring industry-specific skills. The relatively weaker perception of work-life balance represents an important challenge for the sector. Long working hours, shift duties, weekend work and occupational stress may discourage graduates from choosing hospitality careers despite the sector's employment potential. Addressing these concerns through employee-friendly scheduling, supportive organizational cultures and improved welfare practices could enhance the attractiveness of hospitality employment. The relatively diminished perception of work-life balance poses a significant challenge for the sector. Extended working hours, shift responsibilities, weekend commitments, and occupational stress may deter graduates from pursuing careers in hospitality, despite the sector's potential for employment. Tackling these issues through employee-friendly scheduling, nurturing organizational cultures, and enhanced welfare practices could make hospitality employment more appealing. The research also indicates that students' overall perception of the industry is closely linked to their career intentions. The correlation analysis illustrated a positive and statistically significant relationship between career perception and career intention. This implies that enhancing students' understanding and perception of tourism and hospitality may bolster their willingness to enter the sector. The evolving nature of tourism and hospitality also presents an opportunity to redefine the industry as a technology-driven and professionally diverse career landscape. Innovations such as artificial intelligence, digital platforms, smart tourism, data analytics, revenue management, and automated service technologies are generating new roles alongside traditional hospitality jobs. Consequently, universities should ensure that students are aware of these emerging career opportunities. The study asserts that attracting undergraduate talent necessitates more than merely raising awareness of job opportunities. The tourism and hospitality sector must showcase credible career advancement, competitive salaries, job security, meaningful professional development, and enhanced employee well-being. At the same time, universities should bolster industry partnerships, practical training, internships, and career guidance. The future competitiveness of the tourism and hospitality sector in South India will significantly rely on its capacity to attract, nurture, and retain skilled young professionals. A collaborative initiative among universities, employers, industry associations, tourism authorities, and policymakers can aid in reshaping students' perceptions, thereby establishing tourism and hospitality as a respected, sustainable, and appealing career option for the upcoming generation.

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