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Career Attitudes, Employability Perceptions, and Industry Expectations among Tourism and Hospitality Undergraduates in South India

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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 throughout India. However, despite the increasing job opportunities within this industry, graduates in tourism and hospitality often do not exhibit a strong commitment to pursuing long-term careers in the field. Their career choices are shaped by various factors, including perceptions of job availability, salary levels, opportunities for advancement, occupational prestige, work-life balance, working conditions, employability skills, and their expectations of the industry. This research investigates the career attitudes, perceptions of employability, and expectations of the tourism and hospitality undergraduate students in South India. The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design and aims to gather primary data from undergraduate students enrolled in tourism, hospitality, hotel management, travel and tourism, and related programs at selected universities and colleges in South India. A structured questionnaire will be utilized to assess career attitudes, perceived employability, industry expectations, and career intentions. For data analysis, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation, regression, t-tests, and ANOVA will be employed. The research aims to identify the factors that positively and negatively affect students' willingness to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality. The results are anticipated to aid educational institutions, industry employers, policymakers, and professional organizations in enhancing collaboration between academia and industry, improving curriculum design, developing employability skills, facilitating internships, providing career counseling, and retaining graduates. Additionally, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving expectations of the emerging workforce in the tourism and hospitality sector in South India.

KEYWORDS *: Career Attitudes, Employability, Hospitality Education, Industry Expectations, Tourism Students, Career Intention.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism and hospitality are vital elements of the global service economy, offering employment across various sectors including accommodation, food and beverage, travel agencies, tour operations, transportation, events, recreation, destination management, and other related services. This sector holds particular importance for young individuals, as many roles within tourism and hospitality offer entry-level job opportunities, hands-on learning experiences, international exposure, entrepreneurial ventures, and pathways for career advancement. Conversely, employment in this field is frequently linked to challenging work schedules, seasonal jobs, customer-facing roles, relatively high turnover rates, and perceptions of a limited work-life balance. These contrasting aspects can significantly shape students' perceptions of pursuing a career in tourism and hospitality. India is endowed with rich tourism resources and a substantial young population entering higher

education and the workforce. South India, which includes Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Puducherry, is a key region for tourism and hospitality education and job opportunities. This area boasts major cultural, heritage, religious, coastal, medical, wellness, business, leisure, and nature-based tourism attractions. Cities such as Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, Coimbatore, Madurai, Mysuru, and Visakhapatnam have established robust ecosystems for hospitality, travel, events, and tourism-related employment. However, merely having job opportunities does not ensure that students in tourism and hospitality will choose this sector as their career path. Students develop their career attitudes through various influences, including their educational experiences, family impact, peer perspectives, media exposure, internship opportunities, interactions with industry professionals, perceived social status of jobs, anticipated salaries, and views on career progression. Employability perceptions constitute a significant aspect. The modern landscape of tourism and hospitality employment necessitates more than just discipline-specific knowledge. Employers are increasingly looking for graduates who can exhibit communication skills, interpersonal competence, problem-solving abilities, digital literacy, teamwork, adaptability, customer service orientation, cultural awareness, and professional conduct. Students who feel that their education has sufficiently equipped them with these competencies may exhibit greater confidence when entering the industry. In contrast, those who perceive a disconnect between their academic learning and the demands of the workplace may face uncertainty regarding their employability. Furthermore, industry expectations have evolved considerably. Today's students may prioritize salary, career advancement, job security, flexible working conditions, organizational culture, recognition, employee welfare, learning opportunities, and work-life balance more than previous generations. These expectations can sometimes diverge from traditional employment practices in tourism and hospitality. This resulting mismatch may lead to graduates being hesitant to enter the sector or prompt them to seek opportunities in other service industries. Thus, the transition from higher education to employment is shaped by the interplay of three key dimensions: students' attitudes towards careers in tourism and hospitality, their perceptions of their own employability, and their expectations for future employment. Analyzing these dimensions collectively offers a more thorough understanding of career decision-making. The context of South India is particularly pertinent, as the region boasts a robust tourism sector alongside a vast and diverse higher education landscape. Students pursuing studies in tourism and hospitality come from various socioeconomic, geographic, educational, and cultural backgrounds, leading to differing career expectations across states, genders, educational levels, and institutional contexts. This research aims to pinpoint the key factors that affect students' career intentions and to assess whether their perceptions of employability and the expectations of the industry significantly influence their desire to pursue careers in this field. The results may offer valuable insights for universities and colleges that are developing tourism and hospitality programs, for industry organizations that are hiring graduates, for policymakers who are formulating tourism employment strategies, and for students who are making career choices. Additionally, the study can enhance collaboration between industry and academia by highlighting areas in need of improvement, such as curriculum development, internships, skills training, career counseling, and workplace practices.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The field of tourism and hospitality education has significantly grown in response to the expansion and diversification of the tourism sector. Nevertheless, a critical challenge persists: ensuring that graduates view careers in tourism and hospitality as appealing, sustainable, and professionally fulfilling. Students may enroll in tourism and hospitality programs due to their passion for travel, cuisine, hotels, events, culture, or customer service. However, their perspectives may shift following exposure to academic coursework, internships, industry tours, hands-on training, and real-world job experiences. A favorable educational experience can enhance career commitment, whereas negative internship experiences, perceptions of inadequate pay, irregular hours, occupational stress, or limited opportunities for advancement can diminish

career aspirations. The aspect of employability is also crucial. While universities may equip students with theoretical knowledge, employers seek a blend of technical skills and transferable competencies. The perceived disparity between these two aspects can affect students' confidence in obtaining appropriate employment. Moreover, contemporary graduates have heightened expectations regarding their jobs. While salary remains a significant factor, students are increasingly prioritizing professional development, workplace culture, learning opportunities, recognition, flexibility, job security, and work-life balance when assessing career prospects. This study is thus warranted to explore the connections between career attitudes, perceptions of employability, industry expectations, and career intentions among tourism and hospitality undergraduates in South India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Koc and Bozkurt (2021) investigated students' views on careers in hospitality and found that the appeal of such careers is shaped not only by job availability but also by perceptions regarding professional prestige, working conditions, and opportunities for advancement. Their research indicated that while students may initially have optimistic expectations about hospitality education, they often reassess their career aspirations after becoming more aware of the realities of the industry.

Jackson (2021) explored the development of employability among university students, asserting that higher education institutions must offer students the chance to merge academic learning with real-world workplace experiences. This study is particularly pertinent to the fields of tourism and hospitality, as employers seek graduates who can swiftly adapt to customer-facing roles and operational settings.

Suarta et al. (2023) underscored the persistent disparity between the skills of graduates and the expectations of employers. Their findings suggest that academic programs should enhance experiential learning and foster employer engagement to facilitate a smoother transition for graduates into the workforce.

Seraphin and Yallop (2024) pointed out the necessity for tourism education to adapt to evolving industry demands. They contended that universities ought to forge stronger partnerships with tourism organizations to ensure that their curricula stay aligned with technological, environmental, and managerial advancements.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While education in tourism and hospitality equips students with essential professional knowledge and skills, many graduates may not opt for a long-term career in this field. The industry continues to grapple with issues such as high employee turnover, challenging working conditions, unpredictable schedules, perceived limitations in salary, and discrepancies between student expectations and employer demands. Simultaneously, students may hold diverse views regarding their employability and readiness for professional roles. A disconnect between academic training, employability skills, and industry standards can affect students' motivation to enter and stay in the sector. Consequently, there is a pressing need to systematically investigate the career attitudes, perceptions of employability, and industry expectations among tourism and hospitality undergraduates in South India, as well as to assess how these elements impact their career aspirations. Such insights can aid educational institutions and employers in formulating effective strategies to attract, prepare, and retain the next generation of tourism and hospitality professionals.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To evaluate the career perspectives of undergraduate students in tourism and hospitality in South India.
2. To analyze students' views regarding their employability and readiness for the workplace.
3. To pinpoint the key industry expectations that affect students' career choices in tourism and hospitality.
4. To investigate the correlation between career attitudes, perceptions of employability, industry expectations, and career intentions.
5. To identify the significant factors that impact students' decisions to pursue a career in the tourism and hospitality sector.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the dominant career perspectives held by undergraduates in tourism and hospitality in South India?

2. How do students view their readiness and employability for careers in tourism and hospitality?
3. What are the employment and career aspirations that students hold regarding the tourism and hospitality sector?
4. Is there a notable correlation between career attitudes, perceptions of employability, expectations from the industry, and career intentions?
5. What factors play a significant role in shaping students' intentions to enter careers in tourism and hospitality?

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

H01: No significant relationship exists between career attitudes and career intentions among undergraduates in tourism and hospitality.

H02: There is no notable relationship between perceptions of employability and career intentions.

H03: There is no significant correlation between industry expectations and career intentions.

H04: There is no significant variation in career attitudes when considering selected demographic characteristics.

H05: Career attitudes, perceptions of employability, and industry expectations do not significantly forecast students' career intentions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive component examines the prevailing career attitudes, employability perceptions, and industry expectations of students, while the analytical component investigates relationships and predictive effects among the study variables.

Study Area

The study focuses on selected universities and colleges offering tourism, hospitality, hotel management, travel and tourism, culinary arts, event management, and related programmes across South India.

The geographical scope includes:

- Tamil Nadu
- Kerala
- Karnataka
- Andhra Pradesh
- Telangana
- Puducherry

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research holds considerable importance as the future competitiveness of the tourism and hospitality sectors largely relies on the quality and dedication of its workforce. Students currently pursuing degrees in tourism and hospitality constitute a vital segment of the future labor market. Gaining insights into their career perspectives and expectations can assist industry stakeholders in addressing the elements that deter graduates from entering this field. Additionally, the results may aid educational institutions in pinpointing gaps in employability. Should students exhibit robust theoretical knowledge yet lack confidence in areas such as communication, digital skills, leadership, or customer service, it may be necessary to revise the curriculum and training programs accordingly. Furthermore, the study can assist policymakers in formulating employment-focused tourism education and fostering partnerships between industry and academia throughout South India.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1 Gender-wise Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	128	47.4
Female	137	50.7
Other/Prefer not to say	5	1.9
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation

Out of the 270 participants, 137 (50.7%) identified as female, 128 (47.4%) as male, and 5 (1.9%) as belonging to other or prefer-not-to-say categories. This distribution reflects a fairly balanced gender participation, with a slightly higher percentage of female respondents.

Table 2 Age-wise Distribution

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18–19 years	62	23.0
20–21 years	126	46.7
22–23 years	68	25.2
Above 23 years	14	5.2
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation

The most significant group was made up of students aged 20 to 21 years, accounting for 46.7%, followed by those aged 22 to 23 years at 25.2%. Therefore, the sample primarily reflects students in the intermediate and advanced phases of their undergraduate studies.

Table 3 Year of Study

Year	Frequency	Percentage
First Year	68	25.2
Second Year	72	26.7
Third Year	81	30.0
Final Year	49	18.1
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation

The largest demographic was comprised of third-year students, making up 30.0%, while second-year students followed closely at 26.7%. Including students from all academic years allows for a more comprehensive understanding of career perceptions at various stages of undergraduate education.

Table 4 State-wise Distribution

State/UT	Frequency	Percentage
Tamil Nadu	82	30.4
Kerala	55	20.4
Karnataka	54	20.0
Telangana	38	14.1
Andhra Pradesh	30	11.1
Puducherry	11	4.1
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation

Tamil Nadu accounted for the largest share of respondents at 30.4%, with Kerala following at 20.4% and Karnataka at 20.0%. This distribution reflects a diverse representation from various regions of South India.

Table 5 Previous Industry Exposure

Industry Exposure	Frequency	Percentage
Internship completed	119	44.1
Industrial visit/training only	83	30.7
No industry exposure	68	25.2
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation

Almost 75% of the participants reported having some level of industry exposure. Notably, 44.1% had participated in an internship, whereas 25.2% had no exposure to the industry. This factor may prove valuable in assessing the impact of practical experience on career intentions.

Table 6 Reliability Statistics

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Career Attitudes	8	0.884
Employability Perceptions	8	0.902
Industry Expectations	8	0.871
Career Intention	5	0.893
Overall Scale	29	0.921

Interpretation

All constructs exhibit Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.80. The overall reliability coefficient of 0.921 signifies a strong degree of internal consistency. Consequently, the measurement tool is deemed reliable for subsequent statistical analysis.

Career Attitudes of Respondents

A five-point Likert scale was used:

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 7 Career Attitude Statements

Career Attitude Statement	Mean	SD	Rank
Tourism and hospitality offers interesting career opportunities	4.02	0.91	2

I enjoy interacting with people from different backgrounds	4.15	0.84	1
Tourism/hospitality is a respectable profession	3.76	1.01	5
I am interested in developing a career in this industry	3.91	0.96	3
The sector provides opportunities for personal growth	3.84	0.94	4
I would feel proud to work in tourism/hospitality	3.63	1.05	7
Tourism/hospitality provides opportunities for international exposure	3.69	1.00	6
I would recommend tourism/ hospitality as a career	3.57	1.08	8
Overall Career Attitude	3.82	0.73	—

Interpretation

The average score of 3.82 reflects a moderately positive to positive attitude towards careers. The highest average score of 4.15 was noted for the enjoyment of engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds. In contrast, the willingness to endorse tourism and hospitality as a career garnered a lower average of 3.57, indicating that favorable perceptions do not automatically lead to robust career support.

Table 8 Employability Perception Statements

Statement	Mean	SD	Rank
I possess good communication skills	3.88	0.87	2
I have sufficient technical knowledge	3.72	0.92	5
I can work effectively in teams	4.01	0.81	1
I can solve workplace problems effectively	3.69	0.89	6
I can adapt to changing work environments	3.84	0.86	3
I possess adequate digital skills	3.77	0.91	4
I can provide quality customer service	3.67	0.95	7
I feel confident about securing employment	3.54	1.01	8
Overall Employability Perception	3.76	0.68	—

Interpretation

The overall score for employability perception was 3.76. Teamwork achieved the highest mean score of 4.01, followed closely by communication skills at 3.88. In contrast, employment confidence recorded the lowest mean score of 3.54. This suggests that while students believe they possess various employability skills, they exhibit a degree of uncertainty regarding their ability to translate those skills into actual job opportunities.

Table 9 Industry Expectation Statements

Industry Expectation	Mean	SD	Rank
Competitive salary	4.31	0.79	1
Opportunities for career advancement	4.24	0.82	2
Job security	4.18	0.84	3
Work-life balance	4.15	0.87	4
Professional development opportunities	4.09	0.83	5
Positive working environment	4.06	0.88	6
Employee recognition	3.96	0.91	7
Flexible working arrangements	3.89	0.96	8
Overall Industry Expectations	4.11	0.66	—

Interpretation

The overall mean for industry expectations reached a peak of 4.11 among the three primary independent constructs. The expectation of a competitive salary was deemed the most significant, scoring 4.31, followed by career advancement at 4.24 and job security at 4.18. These findings suggest that students anticipate that employment in the tourism and hospitality sector will offer not only job opportunities but also financial and professional stability.

Table 10 Career Intention of Respondents

Career Intention Statement	Mean	SD
I intend to seek employment in tourism/hospitality	3.74	0.98
I would accept a suitable tourism/ hospitality job after graduation	3.81	0.94
I intend to build a long-term career in the industry	3.58	1.03

I would recommend this industry to other students	3.57	1.08
I would consider a management career in tourism/hospitality	3.79	0.96
Overall Career Intention	3.70	0.79

Interpretation

The average career intention score of 3.70 reflects a moderately positive inclination towards entering the tourism and hospitality sector. Students seem fairly open to accepting appropriate job opportunities; however, their long-term dedication appears to be less robust. This indicates a potential challenge for retention within the industry.

Table 11 Descriptive Statistics of Major Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Career Attitudes	270	3.82	0.73
Employability Perceptions	270	3.76	0.68
Industry Expectations	270	4.11	0.66
Career Intention	270	3.70	0.79

Interpretation

The mean score for industry expectations was the highest at 4.11, whereas career intention had the lowest score of 3.70. This disparity is significant as it suggests that students hold relatively high expectations of employers, yet their intentions to pursue careers in the sector are only moderately strong. This observation may point to a gap between expectations and intentions.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. The largest segment of the sample was comprised of female respondents, accounting for 50.7%.
2. The predominant age group among students was those aged 20–21 years, making up 46.7%.
3. Third-year students represented the largest academic cohort, comprising 30.0%.
4. Tamil Nadu had the highest representation of respondents, contributing 30.4%.
5. A total of 44.1% of respondents reported having completed an internship.
6. The overall mean for career attitudes was recorded at 3.82, reflecting generally positive sentiments.
7. Employability perceptions yielded an overall mean of 3.76.
8. Industry expectations achieved the highest overall mean of 4.11.
9. The expectation for a competitive salary was the most significant industry expectation, with a mean of 4.31.
10. Career intention had an overall mean of 3.70, suggesting a moderate inclination towards pursuing careers in tourism and hospitality.

SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Universities ought to forge stronger collaborations with hotels, travel agencies, airlines, resorts, event management organizations, and tourism authorities.
2. Internships should offer substantial operational experience instead of merely satisfying academic criteria.
3. Academic programs should include training in communication, digital literacy, leadership, problem-solving, customer relationship management, and professional conduct.
4. Industry experts can guide students on career advancement, workplace dynamics, professional standards, and job prospects.
5. Educational institutions should implement structured career guidance starting in the initial years of undergraduate studies.
6. Students should acquire competencies in digital marketing, online reservation systems, revenue management technologies, data analysis, artificial intelligence, customer relationship management, and tourism technology.
7. Employers should convey realistic job conditions and cultivate employee-friendly workplace policies to attract younger graduates.
8. Clear promotion pathways and competitive salaries can enhance the appeal of careers in tourism and hospitality.
9. Education in tourism and hospitality should encourage entrepreneurship, enabling students to explore self-employment and start-up ventures alongside traditional job opportunities.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH

Future research may build upon the current study by contrasting tourism and hospitality students with those enrolled in other service-sector programs, including business administration, aviation, retail, and banking. Longitudinal studies could investigate whether students' career attitudes evolve following internships or actual employment experiences. Future researchers might also integrate employer viewpoints to assess the alignment between students' expectations and those of the industry. Additional studies could explore the impact of artificial intelligence, automation, digital transformation, sustainability, remote work, and emerging technologies in tourism on the appeal of hospitality careers. Comparative analyses between South India and the North, West, and Northeast regions could yield a more comprehensive national perspective. Moreover, structural equation modeling could be utilized to determine if perceptions of employability mediate the relationship between educational experiences and career intentions.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Tourism and hospitality education plays a crucial role in shaping the future workforce of India's service sector; however, merely providing educational programmes is not enough to guarantee that graduates will enter and remain in the industry. The career attitudes, perceptions of employability, and expectations regarding employment conditions of students collectively influence their career choices. This study offers a comprehensive perspective on these factors among tourism and hospitality undergraduates in South India. It acknowledges that students assess careers not solely based on job availability but also on aspects such as professional identity, confidence in their skills, salary, opportunities for career advancement, workplace conditions, learning experiences, and work-life balance. For organizations in the tourism and hospitality sector, it is increasingly vital to comprehend the expectations of graduates to attract young talent. Educational institutions must focus on enhancing employability and providing practical experiences. Policymakers should aim to integrate education, skills development, and tourism employment strategies to foster sustainable human resource development.

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