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Recalculating - the effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on the career planning of tourism students

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Abstract

Attracting and retaining qualified employees has been a challenge in the tourism sector even before the pandemic. The shortage of workers with a quality education is partly due to the fact that young people with a degree in tourism choose to work in other industries after graduation. Our aim is to explore the perception of tourism as a profession of tourism students by examining the aspects influencing career choices before and after the epidemic. Focus group interviews were used to map students 'attitudes toward tourism. The results suggest that students who consider the profession to fit their personality are more likely to build their careers in this sector, while those who have had mainly negative experiences in a crisis situation have a different perspective on their future

Keywords: career planning, tourism industry image, Covid-19, person-industry congeniality, tourism education

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1. Introduction

In just a few months, overtourism has been replaced by "null tourism" in the global tourism market. As a result of the pandemic, the vulnerability of catering jobs has come to light and deep-seated problems have also come to the fore (Gössling et al., 2021). The tourism and hospitality industry has reached a critical juncture even before the epidemic, as the challenge of attracting and retaining "quality" and skilled employees is a global challenge (Richardson, 2009). The lack of staff with quality education is partly due to the fact that hospitality students typically turn to other industries after graduation (Wen et al., 2019). Without the positive attitude of employees towards work, it is impossible to achieve guest satisfaction and loyalty, but this remains a challenge as long as the disadvantages of working in the tourism sector outweigh its benefits. According to some approaches, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism workforce is an amplification of the already existing and well-known challenges of this group, rather than new effects, meaning the high levels of fluctuation, uncertainty, low wages and most often poor working conditions (Baum et al., 2020). The aim of the following research paper is first to explore the perceived image of the professions related to tourism that students have. Second, the goal is to map the factors influencing career choice including the importance of industry-person fit. The study focuses on students' postgraduate career plans, where focus group interviews were conducted with the participation of undergraduate students to map students' attitudes toward the tourism industry. The main research question covers the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has affected students' perceptions of working in tourism and their career goals in the sector. Examining the effects of the Covid-19 epidemic may be particularly important in the future to be able to estimate the modifying power of an emerging crisis in terms of the development of the industry picture and the intention to leave the field. To be able to find the answers to this question, first, factors influencing the career choice decisions of tourism students need to be identified for future strategies and research questions.

2. Theoretical background

The perceived attractiveness of building a career in the tourism industry

The employees of the future are already choosing not only a job but also a career based on what university training they are applying for. When they complete the training, they decide again whether they will stay on the course, i.e. whether they see a perspective or what makes the industry attractive, and whether they plan to build a career in that sector. According to the theory of career planning, individuals can make good career decisions if they are aware of the career paths they can choose from and if they have a realistic picture of how to achieve their set career goals (Hansen, 1976). Conscious work or career planning requires students to understand the specifics of the job market, build a network, gain self-knowledge, and set specific career goals (Jackson, 2015; King, 2004). It can be difficult for new entrants if they do not have the necessary information, without which students will not be able to make full career choices. Interestingly, students also see high levels of stress when they see too many opportunities and do not trust enough in their own decision-making ability (Wang – Tsai, 2014) to embark on the path that best fits their personality without help (Pauw, 2009).

Motivational factors in choosing a career path

According to Wan et al. (2014), the factors that best influence the decision of future tourism and catering workers are a) an interesting job, b) an opportunity for advancement, c) a secure future, d) a good salary, e) social usefulness; and f) social prestige. Another study in Ghana revealed that industry-person fit, social benefits, and opportunities for professional development played a crucial role in the career choice of tourism students (Armoo – Neequaye, 2014). In order to acquire and retain a skilled workforce, therefore, attention must be paid to the factors that influence graduates' career decisions and career intentions. While some research shows the positive benefits of working in tourism; such as the exciting, enjoyable nature of work, perceived career opportunities and interesting tasks, the opportunity to care for others, starting one's own business, developing skills, training opportunities, all this in a rapidly changing sector (Barron et al., 2007). In contrast, other studies confirm that students mostly believe that these needs are not being met in the hospi-

tality and tourism industry (Amissah et al., 2020). Although the tourism sector offers an extremely wide range of career paths for students (Burns, 1993), students do not feel that the opportunities inherent in the industry provide them with the factors they consider important (Richardson, 2009). One of the most important factors for those working in tourism when planning a career is the existence of a personality-industry fit, passion and calling (Birtch et al., 2021), which means that they feel they can make effective use of their skills and abilities in their jobs (Kusluvan– Kusluvan, 2000; Zhou, 2000).

Factors facilitating and affecting decision - making

The need for independent and conscious career management is critical not only for those entering the labor market soon, but also for those in the early stages of their degree. Often, students do not have the right career management skills (Bridgstock, 2009), so they may not be prepared to make a career and confident career choice. Career choice is a complex phenomenon and is subject to a number of external influences (Jackson, 2015) that can help but also complicate the decision-making process. Lee et al (2019) identified 5 groups that best influence students 'career choices: counselors, teachers, professional mentors / partners, parents, and social media. It is important that educators have existing professional experience and enthusiasm for the industry, which plays a key role in shaping students' attitudes (Fraser, 2020; Jackson, 2015). Internships and / or work experience can also make students committed, but they can also create negative experiences and attitudes among students about the industry (Brown et al., 2014). A new generation of talent seeks authenticity and transparency, and employee experience is crucial to them. They tend to favor organizations where their values are the same, they can be self-identical, and they can achieve their career goals (Chiţu, 2020). Role models and mentors play a key role in students' lives and can effectively influence young people by showing them through practical examples what skills they need to work, as well as providing personalized support and advice (Counsell, 1996). These actions reduce uncertainty and anxiety about career decisions (Chuang, 2010). Overall, the combined application of these influencing factors can have a positive effect on students' attitudes towards working in the tourism and hospitality industry (Fraser, 2020).

The effect of a crisis on turnover intention in tourism

The significant decline in the number of jobs associated with tourism due to COVID-19, and mass layoffs, can trigger anxiety and negative emotional reactions in career starters, which is expected to reduce the attractiveness of the hospitality and tourism professions (Birtch et al., 2021). The image of the industry is also negatively affected by the fact that several companies have made unfair decisions in dealing with the crisis. This results in decreased levels of trust among employees towards employers (Agarwal, 2021). The hospitality industry and tourism organizations will therefore need to focus in the future on restoring trust, which will ensure a continuous supply of future workers in the industry (Yu et al., 2021). Job insecurity and burnout cause turnover intent and may even make employees think about changing careers (Bajrami et al., 2021). On one other hand, younger employees may be motivated to take on more responsible jobs and perform challenging tasks. Companies may therefore benefit from recruiting new entrants, as younger employees are more likely to adapt to rapid changes in the industry (Bajrami et al., 2021). Wu (2013) however concluded that recent tourism graduates are likely to choose jobs in other industries where they are offered a more competitive salary and benefits.

In conclusion, the following qualitative research aims to find answer to the following research questions: (1) what motivates students to choose the tourism industry and how do they see being employed in the sector, (2) to what extend did the Covid-19 pandemic change their career plans, and (3) what factors facilitate their career decisions. In depth focus group interviews helped in revealing the characteristics and needs that students look to fulfill when looking for employment in the sector. Using focus group interviews allowed the researchers' access to the phenomena of high turnover intentions of tourism students as well.

3. Method

We selected a focus group interview method to map students' career planning decisions. The participants were third-year and graduate students of the Corvinus University of Budapest, and applicants of a tourism focused mentor program called protégé. which started in September 2020. During the research, two interviews were conducted, with a total of 12 participants, in November

2021, with personal participation. To get a broader answer to the research questions, students came from different universities, juniors and seniors both. Summary demographics are provided in Appendix 1. Given the exploratory nature of the research, we used semi-structured interview questions. The topics covered in the interview were defined on the basis of the literature, concerning the perceived attractiveness of employment in tourism, the motivational factors relevant to career planning, and the impact of the Covid-19 on career decisions (Appendix 2). The results of the research were structured using a thematic analysis procedure. Thematic analysis allows for an in-depth description of the entire data set and a clear model (Braun – Clarke, 2019). The two focus group discussions lasted 90-120 minutes. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. During the analysis, codes were generated according to the topics, and then categories were fine-tuned by outlining a thematic diagram (Appendix 3).

4. Results

According to the interviews, students initially had a good opinion about working in the tourism and hospitality sector. Students applied for tourism courses because they saw a kind of self-fulfillment in the career opportunities offered by the sector. However, as a result of gaining more insight into the negatives of the sector, their commitment to the area decreased. In terms of motivating factors for employment, students look for opportunities for development and learning, they want a job where they have career prospects. Interestingly, personality-industry fit and employee experience are priorities to them. As a result of the Covid pandemic, students became uncertain about their future, but that did not make them leave the industry yet. Many of the students see new opportunities in the situation, so if they receive positive impulses, they will enter the world of the labor market as enthusiastic new employees. In addition, young people want to stand on more than one foot, so tourism is likely to be seen as a side career path. In terms of education, students said they did not get what they expected. They want more practical lessons and the professional experience and professional credibility of the educators is important to them. The supportive role of professionals is also key, whether it is their participation in education, internships or personal mentoring. In conclusion, the career decisions of tourism and hospitality students are influenced to a

greater extent by the positive impulses gained from the professions' representatives, rather than the career planning uncertainty which was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Discussion and recommendations

In summary, the perception of students studying tourism about tourism as a profession is mainly negative. So much so, that they do not feel socially valued either working in the sector. In terms of career choices, flexibility, future career prospects, development opportunities and personal-industry fit are paramount for them. The latter factor has a positive effect on their career plans, as it was already an important consideration when choosing the university. The Covid-19 epidemic did not create an intention to leave the industry in students who are committed to the industry, while it left uncertain ones still unsure. Our research confirms that student recruitment strategies, such as personality tests, should be used to act as a filter and help provide career guidance to students (Teng, 2008). If students are able to learn about the career opportunities and circumstances available to them and gain self-knowledge, they will develop a realistic self-image, which can help them decide which area of the tourism industry fit their personality (Setiyorini et al., 2015). University-business collaborations also have a number of benefits, so educators need to strengthen and develop joint projects with tourism businesses. Dual training programs are often described as a solution, although the success of such programs requires a global change of approach. Quality control and screening of professional partners is key. Moreover, these trainings should not hinder students' studies or work-life balance, the lack of which can lead to burnout during their early lives. In terms of future research opportunities, the qualitative research presented in this study can serve as a basis for future quantitative research. A model based on the results of a questionnaire can help understand what factors influence the attractiveness of tourism-related professions for tourism students. In addition, the study of the impact of work experience and the study of the positive influence of mentoring programs and student organizations can bring interesting results. The study was limited by the low number of students starting their careers participating in the focus group interviews, which may have a distorting effect on industry perceptions. However, it is important to note that the crisis is not yet over, which leaves room for further research to monitor change.

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Annex

Appendix 1: Demographics of interview participants

Number	Gender	Age	University	Year	Experience in the tourism industry	Mentor program participation
1	F	22	Debrecen	3	yes	yes
2	F	22	BCE	2	no	no
3	M	22	BCE	3	yes	no
4	F	20	BCE Székesfehérvár - dual	3	yes	no
5	F	20	BCE Székesfehérvár - dual	3	yes	no
6	F	21	BCE	2	yes	no
7	F	22	Kodolányi	2	yes	yes
8	F	23	Kodolányi	4	yes	yes
9	F	21	Kodolányi	1	yes	yes
10	F	21	BCE Székesfehérvár	2	yes	yes
11	F	24	METU	fresh graduate	yes	yes
12	F	29	BCE (postgraduate program)	1	yes	yes

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Appendix 2: Focus Group Interview Topics

Topic 1: Demographics and introduction of participants

Topic 2: Attractiveness of working in tourism

Topic 3: The importance of motivational elements in career choice

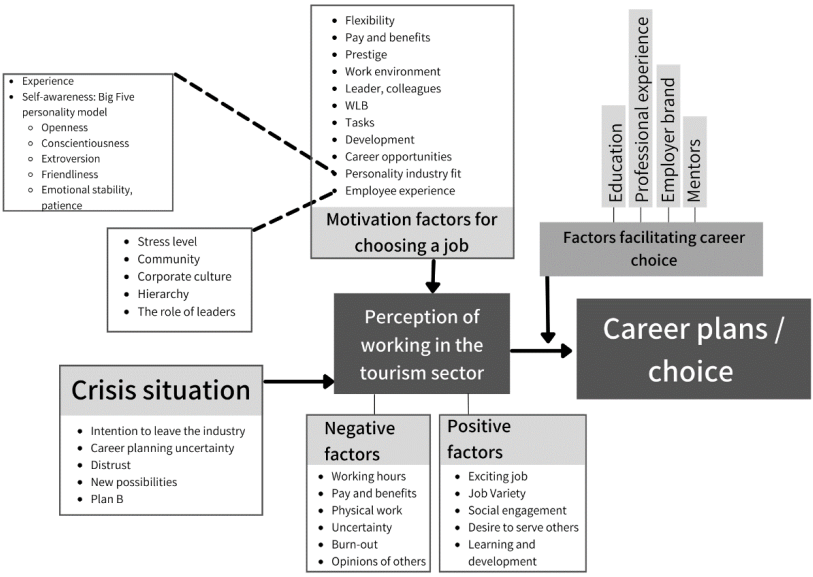
Topic 4: The role of industry-personality matching

Topic 5: Impact of COVID-19 on career plans

Topic 6: Assessing tourism education

Topic 7: Additional comments and opinions requested by the participants, solutions for the industry image, career start

Appendix 3: Results - thematic code map



Source: own editing