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Perceptions towards Hospitality and Tourism Careers : Insights from Japanese Undergraduates

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Perceptions Towards Hospitality and Tourism Careers: Insights from Japanese Undergraduates

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigated the career perceptions of Japanese undergraduate students, specifically contrasting views on general careers versus those in the hospitality and tourism sector. Data collected from 137 students at an annual hotel career fair via structured surveys revealed that while most career perceptions were consistent, there were marked differences in 'a job with high-quality resources' and 'job mobility'. These aspects were viewed more favourably for careers in hospitality and tourism. This finding contrasted with previous research from other geographic locations, where students expressed more negative perceptions about the hospitality and tourism careers, including the 'a job with high-quality resources' factor. Notably, a limited number of current research participants had industry exposure through internships, suggesting potential biases in their perceptions. A realistic job preview is vital in making informed early career choices, and its absence might lead to increased job turnover. Given that Japan's hospitality sector reported a 25.6% employee turnover rate in 2022, this research finding emphasises the need for comprehensive career insights for students, advocating for robust internships and academia-industry collaborations.

Keywords: Hospitality and tourism career, Perceptions, Undergraduates,
Career expectation-reality gap

1. INTRODUCTION

The hospitality and tourism sector is struggling with chronic labour shortage, a situation worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones & Comfort, 2020). The precarious nature of jobs and the industry's treatment of its workforce during the pandemic has fostered negative perceptions among potential employees (Wong et al., 2021). The perception of the hospitality and tourism industry is critical when attracting new talents and influencing the job experiences of current employees within the sector (Wong et al., 2021). Previous research emphasises that many hospitality employees leave the hospitality and tourism industry due to a misalignment between their pre-employment expectations and the realities faced in

their roles (Sanga, 2020). This underlines the importance of offering undergraduates a more precise and realistic understanding of the sector and its careers. The primary objective of this research note is to measure how Japanese undergraduate students perceive careers in the hospitality and tourism sector. A total of 137 non-hospitality and tourism major students completed survey questionnaires during an annual hotel career fair hosted by Kansai Gaidai University. By examining students' perceptions of a career in general versus a career in the hospitality and tourism industry, this research attempts to advocate informed decision-making in shaping more effective hospitality and tourism curricula and job training initiatives for educators. Ultimately, this endeavour may give students a more realistic preview of what to expect before joining the workforce.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding individuals' perceptions is pivotal in predicting their behaviours, and this aspect becomes complex when considering the career decision-making process. This process is inherently complicated due to the multifaceted interplay of individual, social, and economic factors that influence the final decision-making (Anthony et al., 2021). Existing research has underlined the critical role of career perceptions in shaping career intentions and, subsequently, the level of commitment to the chosen career (Sekiguchi et al., 2023). As a result, several researchers have attempted to comprehend students' perceptions regarding careers in the hospitality and tourism sector. Through a survey questionnaire, Sanga (2020) examined the perceptions of 405 non-hospitality and tourism management students in Tanzania and revealed that students view physical working conditions and co-worker relationships as favourable aspects of hospitality and tourism careers, while the nature of work is seen less favourably.

Regarding career intentions, students consider more on the nature of work, pay and benefits, career prospects, and industry exposure (Sanga, 2020). In their Macau-based study, Yim et al. (2014) also revealed that career prospects are a key determinant of a student's commitment to the industry, with social status strongly associated with the student's perceptions of industry prospects. It is important to note that students' perceptions of job roles directly correlate with the perceived social stature of the industry (Yim et al., 2014). According to Richardson (2009), undergraduate students in Australia generally do not believe

that a career in the tourism and hospitality industry will offer them the value they consider important in pursuing a future career.

Industry exposure is also vital in influencing undergraduate students' perceptions of shaping hospitality and tourism careers. Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) found that students formed negative perceptions of the career after gaining practical work experience due to perceived negative job characteristics, including a lack of work-life balance, working long hours, weekend work, seasonality, low social status, unfair promotions, low pay, insufficient benefits, unqualified managers, and poor work environments and conditions. Similarly, Cheng and Tung (2021) found that perceived low self-esteem stemming from frontline work exposure is a significant deterrent for students in pursuing hospitality careers (Penny Wan et al., 2014).

However, Jackson and Wilton (2017) proposed a silver lining, suggesting that students develop an interest in hospitality and tourism careers upon industry exposure, especially when they find a fit between personalities and job roles. Further emphasising the role of academia, Lee et al. (2018) noted that proactive and positive involvement from educators can notably influence students' decisions towards favouring hospitality and tourism careers. While many studies focus on students with industry exposure, there needs to be more research exploring the perceptions of students with minimal or no industry exposure. This research aims to fill this gap and enrich the existing academic discourse.

3. METHODS

A survey was conducted during the annual hotel career fair at Kansai Gaidai University in 2020 to investigate the perceptions of undergraduates interested in pursuing careers within the hospitality and tourism sector. Participants were provided with a structured two-page survey questionnaire and an informational package about the career fair program. The questionnaire was adapted from two surveys utilised in previous studies by Richardson (2009), encompassing a variety of factors influencing career choice. The first section enumerated 20 significant factors influencing career decisions, and participants were instructed to rate the importance of each factor in determining their career choices. A purposive sampling was employed, targeting homogeneous groups with similar interests (hotel career), attitudes,

and perceptions towards careers in the hospitality and tourism industry. Participants were allowed to complete the survey during or after the job fair events. Out of the 153 survey questionnaires collected, 17 were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete responses, yielding a total of 137 usable questionnaires for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 26. Initially, a simple analysis was carried out to find out the percentage distribution of students' ratings regarding the importance of various factors in choosing a general career and a career in the hospitality and tourism industry (Table 3). Subsequently, a T-test was performed to compare the significant differences between the importance of these factors when choosing a general career versus a career in the hospitality and tourism industry (Table 4).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Characteristics of Respondents

Among 137 participants, female and male students accounted for 86.8% and 13.2%, respectively (Table 1). Additionally, it was observed that 83.7% of participants were in their 3rd year, which is notably their job search year, followed by 12.4% of 1st year and 3.9% of 2nd-year students (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographics.

| Variable | Category | Sample % |
|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Gender | Female | 86.8 |
| | Male | 13.2 |
| Study Year | 1 st year | 12.4 |
| | 2 nd year | 3.9 |
| | 3 rd year | 83.7 |

Note: N = 137.

As Table 2 indicates, most participants completed Hotel or Tourism related courses (85.3%), yet many students had not been exposed to a Hotel or Tourism work environment (75.8%), such as hotel internship experiences. Of the participants, only 28.7% committed to pursuing a career in the Hotel industry, while a large percentage (68.3%) indicated that working in the Hotel sector remains one of their career options.

Table 2

Demographics (Cont.).

| Variable | Category | Sample % |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Enrolment in Hotel or Tourism related courses | Yes | 85.3 |
| | No | 14.7 |
| Desire to work in hotels | Very much | 28.7 |
| | Fairly | 68.3 |
| | Not much | 3.1 |
| Prior hotel internship experience | Yes | 24.2 |
| | No | 75.8 |

4.2 Important career factors and the extent to which students believe a career in hospitality and tourism will offer these.

Table 3 indicates students' considerations regarding important career factors in general and specifically within the hospitality and tourism industry. According to the findings, it seems that Japanese students tend to have lower expectations for a quality work environment and workplace support in general. The survey results indicate lower scoring, particularly concerning factors such as work-life balance (*reasonable workload* 20%), job mobility (*opportunity for international travel* 34.9%), utilisation of knowledge acquired from university (*use my university degree* 36.4%), and quality workplace support (*A job with high-quality resources and equipment* 38.8%). Conversely, factors related to job prospects and security (*A secure job* 83.7%), personal or skill development (*A job that offers opportunities for further training* 93.8%), and interpersonal relationships (*Colleagues that I can get along with* 99.2%, *Pleasant working environment* 97.7%) weighted high. The participants set similar standards for a hotel and tourism career except for two factors. As indicated in Table 4, a paired sample t-test demonstrated that there were statistically significant differences between the considerations for a career in general versus a career in the hotel and tourism industry regarding two factors: *A job with high-quality resources and equipment* ($p = 0.003$) and *The opportunity to travel abroad* ($p = 0.009$). The mean values of these two factors of a career in the hospitality and tourism industry were higher than a career in general (Table 4).

Table 3

Percentage of students' ratings of the importance of factors in choosing a career and the extent to which students believe a career in hospitality and tourism will offer these.

| Career factor | Importance when choosing a career (%)* | | | Extent to which H&T offer it (%)* | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------|------|-----------------------------------|------|------|
| | Very | Fairly | Not | Definitely | Some | Not |
| 1. A job that I will find enjoyable | 98.4 | 0 | 1.6 | 94.6 | 3.1 | 2.3 |
| 2. Colleagues that I can get along with | 99.2 | 0 | 0.8 | 98.4 | 0.8 | 0.8 |
| 3. Pleasant working environment | 97.7 | 1.6 | 0.8 | 95.3 | 2.3 | 2.3 |
| 4. A secure job | 83.7 | 14.0 | 2.3 | 82.2 | 12.4 | 5.4 |
| 5. A career that provides intellectual challenge | 64.3 | 30.3 | 5.4 | 69.0 | 24.8 | 6.2 |
| 6. Good promotion prospects | 70.6 | 21.7 | 7.8 | 69.8 | 22.5 | 7.8 |
| 7. A job which gives me responsibility | 70.5 | 26.4 | 3.1 | 73.6 | 22.5 | 3.9 |
| 8. High earnings over length of career | 67.4 | 24.8 | 7.8 | 70.5 | 20.9 | 8.5 |
| 9. A job where I will contribute to society | 85.3 | 9.3 | 5.4 | 85.3 | 10.9 | 3.9 |
| 10. A job where I can use my university degree | 36.4 | 40.3 | 23.3 | 40.3 | 40.3 | 19.4 |
| 11. A job where you gain transferable skills | 57.4 | 28.7 | 14.0 | 56.6 | 28.7 | 14.7 |
| 12. A job that is respected | 75.2 | 18.6 | 6.2 | 81.4 | 12.4 | 6.2 |
| 13. Reasonable workload | 20.9 | 43.4 | 35.7 | 21.7 | 43.4 | 34.9 |
| 14. A job with high quality resources and equipment | 38.8 | 38.0 | 23.3 | 46.5 | 37.2 | 16.3 |
| 15. The opportunity to travel abroad | 34.9 | 40.3 | 24.8 | 47.3 | 31.0 | 21.7 |
| 16. Job mobility—easy to get a job anywhere | 55.0 | 31.0 | 14.0 | 55.8 | 33.3 | 10.9 |
| 17. A job that can easily be combined with parenthood | 86.8 | 7.8 | 5.4 | 86.0 | 8.5 | 5.4 |
| 18. Good starting salary | 58.9 | 28.7 | 12.4 | 60.5 | 28.7 | 10.9 |
| 19. A job where I can care for others | 94.6 | 2.3 | 3.1 | 93.8 | 3.1 | 3.1 |
| 20. A job that offers opportunities for further training | 93.8 | 3.9 | 2.3 | 92.2 | 5.4 | 2.3 |

*Adjusted (valid) percentages excluding missing observations.

Table 4

Differences between importance of factors in choosing a career and the extent to which students believe a career in hospitality and tourism will offer these.

| Career factor | Career general Mean* | H&T career mean | Mean difference | t | p |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------|--------|
| 1. A job that I will find enjoyable | 2.97 | 2.92 | 0.47 | 1.507 | .134 |
| 2. Colleagues that I can get along with | 2.98 | 2.98 | 0.08 | 1.000 | .319 |
| 3. Pleasant working environment | 2.97 | 2.93 | 0.39 | 1.678 | .096 |
| 4. A secure job | 2.81 | 2.77 | 0.47 | .925 | .357 |
| 5. A career that provides intellectual challenge | 2.59 | 2.63 | -.039 | -.928 | .355 |
| 6. Good promotion prospects | 2.63 | 2.62 | .008 | .173 | .863 |
| 7. A job which gives me responsibility | 2.67 | 2.70 | -.023 | -.687 | .493 |
| 8. High earnings over length of career | 2.60 | 2.62 | -.023 | -.576 | .566 |
| 9. A job where I will contribute to society | 2.80 | 2.81 | -.016 | -.470 | .639 |
| 10. A job where I can use my university degree | 2.13 | 2.21 | -.078 | -1.633 | .105 |
| 11. A job where you gain transferable skills | 2.43 | 2.42 | .016 | .294 | .769 |
| 12. A job that is respected | 2.69 | 2.75 | -.062 | -1.268 | .207 |
| 13. Reasonable workload | 1.85 | 1.87 | -.016 | -.300 | .764 |
| 14. A job with high quality resources and equipment | 2.16 | 2.30 | -.147 | -3.062 | .003** |
| 15. The opportunity to travel abroad | 2.10 | 2.26 | -.155 | -2.641 | .009** |
| 16. Job mobility—easy to get a job anywhere | 2.41 | 2.45 | -.039 | -.844 | .400 |
| 17. A job that can easily be combined with parenthood | 2.81 | 2.81 | .008 | .276 | .783 |
| 18. Good starting salary | 2.47 | 2.50 | -.031 | -.647 | .519 |
| 19. A job where I can care for others | 2.91 | 2.91 | .008 | .276 | .783 |
| 20. A job that offers opportunities for further training | 2.91 | 2.90 | .016 | .706 | .482 |

*Values in parentheses are standard deviations Career general mean value 1 = not important, 3 = fairly important and 5 = very important. Hotel career means value 1 = not important, 3 = fairly important and 5 = very important.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to understand undergraduate students' perceptions of careers in the hospitality and tourism sector in comparison to general careers in Japan. The participants exhibited a certain degree of interest in the hospitality and tourism industry. The findings reveal that Japanese undergraduate students largely share similar perceptions and attitudes towards both hospitality and tourism careers, and careers in general, with the exception of two elements: A job with high-quality resources and equipment and job mobility. Students surmise that the hotel and tourism sector would provide superior workplace environments and job mobility. Sanga (2020) also found similar perceptions from non-hospitality and tourism management students in Tanzania. It contrasts the research findings from Australia (Richardson, 2009), where undergraduates displayed more negative perceptions towards hospitality and tourism jobs in every factor except job mobility. It may be pertinent to note that only a small fraction of the participants in the current study had industry exposure through internship experiences (24.2%), whereas a more significant proportion of the research participants in Australia had extensive internship exposure. This differential in practical experience may contribute to the contrasting perceptions observed between the two research sample groups (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Besides, it was intriguing that Japanese students seemed unaware of the typical job characteristics of the hospitality and tourism industry, including low pay, job insecurity, and a lack of work-life balance. Alternatively, it could be that students' perceptions reflect a broader societal norm in Japan, where it's understood that careers often start with lower salaries and demand significant work dedication.

According to a white paper by the Japan Tourism Agency (2022), Japan's hospitality and restaurant sector is grappling with a record-high employee turnover rate of 25.6%. Multiple factors likely contribute to employees' diminished commitment to their careers in this sector. For early career seekers, the lack of a realistic job preview of the career landscape may be a significant contributing factor which results in employee job turnover (Holton & Russell, 1997). In Japan, although internship opportunities are provided to students during their job search years, those experiences are structured more like job seminars than authentic job experiences. For instance, students may visit a company for a three-day field trip and interact with employees casually as part of their internship experience. Within the realm

of hotel internships specifically, students are often offered a work experience lasting two weeks or less. Such brief exposure may not allow students to comprehensively understand prospective employees' career landscape, particularly in the hotel and tourism industry. As a result, this lack of in-depth experience could potentially influence students' perceptions and, subsequently, their job satisfaction after joining the workforce (Holton & Russell, 1997).

For practical implications, as Lee et al. (2018) highlighted, course instructors can positively influence students' career perceptions. Therefore, hospitality and tourism educators should portray a more realistic outlook of careers within the sector by organising more structured internship experiences, arranging mentorship programs, hosting guest lectures from the industry, and conducting field trips to hospitality and tourism establishments. These alternative learning experiences can offer students a more pragmatic understanding of hospitality and tourism careers, which may foster greater job satisfaction and career advancement upon transitioning into the professional realm. This approach enriches the educational experience and potentially contributes to addressing the industry challenges related to employee retention and satisfaction.

Furthermore, hospitality and tourism educators should communicate the benefits and career prospects within the hospitality industries and companies to students as well as the challenges (Adhoch, 2019). They should inform students regarding mobility progression, job diversity in the industry, and other pertinent career information to foster enhanced interest in careers within the sector. Indeed, a well-rounded understanding of career identity and long-term career planning will empower students to formulate realistic and apt career expectations. To conclude, this research aspires to contribute significantly towards informed decision-making in developing more effective hospitality and tourism curricula and job training programs.

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