Employability Anxiety and Career Intention among Hospitality and Tourism Management Students: A Pre- and Post-COVID-19 Comparison Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has left the tourism industry with severe joblessness which affect hospitality and tourism management students. Based on gaps in the literature, the study examines the effects of COVID-19 on hospitality and tourism management students by examining the potential changes in their employability anxiety and career intention before and after the pandemic. It employed a quantitative retrospective pretest-posttest (RPP) research design. An online questionnaire was used to collect data from the chosen clusters of target respondent. Frequencies and a paired-samples t-test were used to analyze data from the 409 responses collected. Eta squared was used to calculate the effect size of the changes before and after COVID-19. Key findings suggest COVID-19 has increased the students' anxiety about securing a job in the industry and made them less inclined to pursue a tourism career after graduation. Tourism's vulnerability primarily drives their employability anxiety to external forces and perceived incompetence. The study concludes with suggestions to lower the students' employability anxiety, increase their intention to work in the industry, and restore their trust and confidence in tourism's job-creating ability and economic benefits, such as tourism resilience reassurance, the collaboration between academics and industry practitioners in post-COVID-19 tourism curriculum design, and the government's initiative to re-open tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of tourism in job creation is indisputable, given its labour-intensive nature and the significant multiplier effect on employment in related sectors. According to UNWTO's (2019) estimate, one job in the primary tourism sector created about one-and-a-half indirect jobs in the tourism-related economy. In 2019, the industry generated one in ten jobs globally (UNWTO, 2019), accounting for 334 million jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2021). However, the COVID-19 changed the tourism industry dramatically. Sixty-two million tourism jobs were lost globally in 2020, and the threat of more job losses looms large (WTTC, 2021). Tourism's current state of joblessness may create or heighten the employability anxiety of hospitality and tourism management (HTM) students. Current students may want to quit or withdraw from their current HTM programmes because of the uncertainty and pursue another major that is considered more secure in employment. The situation may also dissuade HTM students from pursuing a career in the industry. Moreover, the considerable unemployment plaguing the tourism industry may discourage potential students from enrolling in a HTM programme, thus reducing college and university admissions.

If the above scenarios materialize, the long-run effects on tourism can be devastating. HTM students play an essential role in the entire tourism ecosystem because they are the backbone of the professionally trained and qualified human resources required by tourism businesses (Hjalager & Andersen, 2001; Lo, 2005; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). As a service industry, tourism needs well-trained and qualified employees capable of consistently delivering excellent customer service, which is the cornerstone of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Unguren, Kacmaz & Kahveci, 2015). HTM students can well fulfil this industry's human resource need. The imperative function of HTM students in the entire tourism ecosystem cannot be overlooked. However, the current joblessness state of tourism caused by COVID-19 leaves us with a troubling question as to how the situation may have affected HTM students. Are they overwhelmed with anxiety about graduating with an HTM degree but unable to secure a job in the industry? Will this anxiety cause them to steer clear of tourism careers and pursue something that is less susceptible to unforeseen circumstances? Have they lost confidence and trust in the industry's job-creating ability and economic benefit?

When it comes to COVID-19 and tourism research, there is a dearth of studies conducted to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on HTM education (Tiwari et al., 2020; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020; Seraphin & Yallop, 2021; Ye & Law, 2021). Several researchers who have investigated tourism education within the context of COVID-19, such as Baum and Hai (2020), Bilsland et al. (2020), Tiwari et al. (2020), Unguren and Huseyinli (2020), Seraphin and Yallop (2021), and Ye and Law (2021), have emphasized the need to explore the impact of COVID-19 on tourism education because research in the area is underrepresented. Given the severe joblessness effect of COVID-19 on tourism, this study seeks to examine the potential changes in HTM students' employability anxiety and career intention before and after the pandemic. The study contributes to the scant literature related to COVID-19's impact on HTM students and imparts an understanding of how the present joblessness state in the industry has affected HTM students' employability anxiety and career plans. With that, practical suggestions can be made to tourism educators, the industry, and the government on the pathway forward for tourism education post-COVID-19. The paper is presented in the following manner: literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tourism Employment

Human capital is one of the most important capitals for tourism. People are an inherent nature of the industry (UNWTO, 2014) – visitors, employees, suppliers/businesses, local people, and governments (Cook et al., 2018). Many tourism products and services are about people and involve people, either as part of attractions and entertainment or as an integral part of the expertise offered to ensure effective operation and further development of the industry (UNWTO, 2014). A high-quality skilled workforce is of absolute importance to tourism. It is needed to ensure the delivery and quality of tourism products and services (UNWTO, 2014). It also provides greater competitiveness and innovation, improves job prospects, and eases the adjustment process in changing markets (UNWTO, 2014). Tourism education can create a high-quality skilled workforce by properly equipping students with courses and skills to become professionally trained employees who possess talents across skill levels for the industry (Hjalager & Andersen, 2001; Lo, 2005, Kunwar, 2018; Tiwari et al., 2021).

Tourism's employment benefits are widely recognized. Between 2014 and 2019, the industry created 1 in 4 net new jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2021). In 2019, the sector accounted for 334 million jobs, meaning 10.6% of all jobs (WTTC, 2021). The industry's job-creating power is one of the top reasons students choose a HTM major. Huyton (1997) reported Chinese students pursued a HTM program because they were motivated by the belief that the hospitality and tourism industry provided more job opportunities. Lee et al. (2006) discovered that job opportunity was the second most crucial factor driving Hong Kong students to pursue a degree in HTM. American students enrolled in a HTM major had the same result (Lee et al., 2014). Alas, COVID-19 may have painted a dark and uncertain state for the prospect of employment in tourism. In 2020, only 272 million people were employed across the industry worldwide, representing a loss of 62 million jobs or a decrease of 18.5% compared to 2019's figures (WTTC, 2021). Moreover, millions of the remaining jobs could be lost without the full recovery of the industry (WTTC, 2021).

As HTM students are part of the entire tourism ecosystem, they may have been directly and indirectly impacted by COVID-19. Employability anxiety may be one area of significant concern. One factor often cited as a contributor to HTM students' employability anxiety is the industry's structural characteristics that make it vulnerable to external factors (e.g., pandemics, natural catastrophes, man-made disasters, financial crises). Tourism vulnerability can result in unwanted impacts such as job losses and an uncertain future (Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). Thus, COVID-19 could have intensified HTM students' perceived job insecurity and limited career opportunities in tourism (Baum & Hai, 2020). The other two common factors are perceived incompetence, which is associated with the feeling that the skills and knowledge gained from college/university do not meet the requirements and expectations of the industry (Tahmassian & Jalali-Moghadam, 2011; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020), and personal attributes that are often experienced by students who do not choose an HTM program willingly and knowingly (Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020).

2.2 Research Gap

Although there is quite a vast number of studies analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry, research on the pandemic's effect on HTM education remains scarce (Bau, & Hai, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2020; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020; Seraphin & Yallop, 2021; Ye & Law, 2021). In a search on research articles associated with the impact of COVID-19 on HTM

education via Google Scholar using such keywords as tourism students, tourism education and COVID-19, only 10 out of the 100 analyzed articles were directly related to HTM education and COVID-19. These articles only focused on several areas: 1) the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on HTM educators and students, such as graduate employability, educators' engagement, students' hope, academic satisfaction and loyalty intention (Sato et al., 2021; Ye & Law, 2021; Zhong et al., 2021; Lei & So, 2021), 2) the changes brought by COVID-19 to tourism education such as the use of technology to support and facilitate online tourism education (Qiu et al., 2020), virtual training and internships (Bilsland et al., 2020; Park & Jones, 2021) and tourism skills and knowledge deemed vital after COVID-19 (Tiwari et al., 2020; Sato et al., 2021), and 3) the future of tourism academia (Edelheim, 2020; Wassler & Fan, 2021).

Even before COVID-19, research on HTM education lacks acknowledgment (Baum et al., 2016; Tiwari et al., 2020). Ballantyne et al. (2009) highlighted that research on tourism education and training represented only 2% of the 21 tourism research articles they analyzed. Research has been predominantly related to pedagogy within tourism education, focusing on curriculum issues (Fidgeon, 2010). Thus, several researchers have emphasized a need to close the gap in the literature (Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2020; Bilsland et al., 2020). By focusing on HTM students' employment anxiety and career intention within the context of COVID-19, the current study specifically responds to the calls of Unguren and Huseyinli (2020) to conduct empirical research on the impact of COVID-19 on tourism education and HTM students' career plan, and of Tiwari et al. (2020) to examine HTM students' feedback on the effects of COVID-19 on their career.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

The current study employed a quantitative retrospective pretest-posttest (RPP) design. It collected quantifiable data on pre-and post-COVID-19 employability anxiety and career intention and performed statistical tests on these data. Using RPP, the study attempted to gauge the degree of change in tourism students' employability anxiety and career intention before and after COVID-19. RPP design was used instead of the traditional pretest-posttest (TPP) model because of the latter design's significant limitations in capturing change (lack of self-awareness at pretest, socially desirable responding, retest effects, and test reactivity). The RPP model has been recommended as an alternative to reduce response shift bias and capture actual change effects, especially when measuring noncognitive constructs such as beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and skills (Moore & Tananis, 2009; Little et al., 2019). Using the RPP method, respondents were not given a pretest (before COVID-19). They answered the online questionnaire only during the post-test period (after COVID-19), during which they were requested to report their employability anxiety and career intention, at the same time, retrospectively think back to the time before the pandemic about their anxiety level to secure a job in tourism and their plan to work in the industry after graduation.

3.2 Sampling Design

The study solely involved hospitality and tourism higher learning institutions in Sabah due to Malaysia's large HTM student population (according to IDP Connect (2021), about 43 colleges and universities offer HTM programmes in the country). Due to the large target population, cluster sampling was used to select the sample. HTM students across hospitality and tourism higher learning institutions in Sabah were divided into several clusters based on several identifiable characteristics, including location, types of institutions (universities and colleges),

types of programmes (tourism management), and program level (Diploma). Based on these characteristics, the sample is composed of students majoring in Diploma in Tourism Management at eight universities and colleges, namely Almacrest International College, Asian Tourism International College (ATIC), Cosmopoint College, Geomatika College, Kinabalu Commercial College (KCC), MSU College Sabah, University College Sabah Foundation (UCSF), and Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah (UiTM Sabah). A total of 409 undergraduate tourism students from the selected higher learning institutions participated in the online survey.

3.3 Survey Instrument

An online questionnaire was employed due to the COVID-19-related movement restrictions imposed by the government and the fact that students were doing online and distant classes. It consisted of three sections, namely Section A examined the respondents' employability anxiety and career intention before COVID-19, Section B asked about the respondents' demographic profile and program enrolment information, and Section C included the same items as in Section A, but they measured employability anxiety and career intention after COVID-19. The measurement items included in the questionnaire were primarily adapted from several prior studies that explored tourism students' attitudes toward tourism careers and employability anxiety, such as Jiang and Tribe (2009), Richardson (2009), Richardson and Butler (2012), Wu et al. (2014) and Unguren and Huseyinli (2020).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The study used an online questionnaire created using Google Forms to collect data. The data were collected between February 2021 and May 2021. The program coordinators at the chosen eight universities and colleges were contacted via email with a request to share the online questionnaire with their students enrolled in Diploma in Tourism Management. Two successive emails were sent to the program coordinators in April 2021 to obtain more respondents. Using the RPP method, the respondents self-assessed their employability anxiety and career intention after COVID-19 and retrospectively reflected on their employability and career plans before COVID-19.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Respondents' Profile and Program Enrolment

The respondents' profile and program enrolment information are presented in Table 1. Gender distribution was 75% female and the remaining 25% male. There might be significantly more female than male respondents because of the general trend of more female than male students in colleges and universities in Malaysia. The number of male students has declined steadily since 2016, and in 2020, female students outnumbered male students by 81% (Hirschmann, 2022). The response rates of the chosen eight institutions were as follows: Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah (28.9%), Asian Tourism International College (17.1%), University College Sabah Foundation (15.4%), Almacrest International College (14.7%), Kinabalu Commercial College (10.5%), Cosmopoint College (7.8%), MSU College Sabah (4.4%) and Geomatika College (1.2%). 32.5% of the respondents were in their first year of study, 47.7% in their second year, and the remaining 19.8% were in their final year. Generally, HTM degrees in Malaysia will take 2 to 2.5 years to complete. A handful of the respondents were in semester six or above because they extended the duration of their study because of taking a semester off, repeating and deferring specific courses. The HTM program was a top choice for 70% of the respondents (meaning they chose it willingly and knowingly). The remaining 30% enrolled in the program