

Students' Perceptions Towards Tourism Education and Careers After the COVID-19 Pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The changing career environment in tourism following COVID-19 has piqued the interest of scholars who are curious as to whether such changes have altered perceptions of tourism careers. This study examined undergraduate students' perceptions towards tourism education, careers and the tourism and hospitality industry prospects following COVID-19 in the Sub-Saharan region using a case study of Malawi. The study is guided by the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) and employed qualitative research methods. The findings revealed that the majority of students had favourable views of tourism careers as a result of their optimism regarding tourism recovery. Those who had lost faith in tourism and its careers expressed reservations about countries' economic ability to implement tourism recovery strategies. The study suggests career guidance and counselling, as well as increasing student awareness of government tourism recovery measures and recovery success stories across industry subsectors, as means of restoring student confidence in tourism and tourism-related careers.

Keywords: Tourism careers; tourism students; perceptions, COVID-19, Malawi

Introduction

COVID-19 continues to have an undeniable impact on people and industries in both developing and developed countries. There was economic shutdown primarily because the virus promoted social isolation, which resulted in the closure of financial markets, corporate offices, businesses, and events, and increased uncertainty, which led to a decline in consumption and investment among consumers, investors, and international trade partners (Ozili, 2020). Notably, COVID-19 had a greater impact on African countries than on other continents (Ozili, 2020), owing to the fact that this part of the world was already a highly vulnerable environment facing numerous serious economic challenges even before COVID-19 (Paci, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the pandemic's economic impact has been severe, as attributed to a combination of declining global demand and local efforts to contain the disease (Paci, 2021).

Tourism is one of the industries that has been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. In 2020, the travel and tourism Gross Domestic Product (GDP) lost more than 2.1 trillion US dollars (Škare et al., 2021). Tourism-related businesses temporarily stopped offering products and services, reduced their operations level, and relatively the number of employees as business survival strategies (Skare et al., 2021). In Sub-Saharan African countries, the tourism sector experienced revenue losses, business closures, retrenchments, and a loss of opportunities to finance community development projects; as well as an increase in the likelihood of poaching (Hambira et al., 2022). Employment was one of the most adversely affected domains of tourism.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020), the tourism employment environment is characterized by paid or unpaid leave, wage reductions, or, in the worst-case scenario, job termination since the disruption of tourism due to COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, tourism employment was associated with substandard working conditions, which COVID-19 has reinforced (Reichenberger & Raymond, 2021). Existing challenges associated with tourism employment include low pay and poor working conditions, sexual harassment, discrimination, unequal treatment, a lack of education and training, an undemocratic and rigid corporate culture, and a high rate of employee turnover (Aynalem et al., 2016; Dwesini, 2019; Hutchings et al., 2020; Patwardhan et al., 2015). As a result of these negative perceptions, countries have a hard time finding and keeping qualified employees, and many graduates leave the tourism industry after they finish college (Grobelna & Skrzyszewska, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably worsened the working environment in the tourism sector (Hambira et al., 2022; Škare et al., 2021).

Considering the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism development and management, studies bordering on perceptions of tourism employment have become a significant component of tourism scholarly work. These studies fall under the broad category of managing human resources in tourism (Baum, 2007), an area that evidently remains under-researched (Baum et al., 2016). A substantial number of studies have examined the relationship between tourism working conditions, associated perceptions, and career choices (Amisshah et al., 2020; Park et al., 2017; Richardson, 2009; Richardson, 2010; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018), with the majority confirming that working conditions in the tourism industry have a significant impact on perceptions and career choices. The COVID-19 pandemic is a career shock for many people worldwide (Akkermans et al., 2020). Now that COVID-19 has altered the working and business conditions in the tourism industry, increased attention and emphasis have been placed on determining its impact on perceptions and career choices, and research on the subject has diverted in that direction, mainly focusing on students in tourism and hospitality training institutions. The current study acknowledges, builds on, and complements previous work by Benaraba et al. (2022), Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) and Shah et al. (2021) in elucidating students' attitudes toward tourism, tourism education, and careers in light of the cataclysmic effects of COVID-19 on tourism.

COVID-19 has had such a profound effect on tourism and tourism careers that studies are being conducted to determine associated impacts on public perceptions of tourism education and careers with some studies focusing on tourism student perceptions and career reflections. The current study joins other researchers in examining students' perceptions of tourism education and careers in the aftermath of the cataclysmic effects of COVID-19 on tourism. It builds on the ground work on the subject by Benaraba et al. (2022), Birch et al. (2021), Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) and Shah et al. (2021).

In view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented impact on perceptions and relative career choices towards the tourism industry, this study was conducted to examine students' perceptions towards tourism education and careers after the COVID-19

pandemic in the Sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, the study objectives were to determine students' awareness of the impact of COVID-19 on tourism; their perceptions of tourism as a tool for economic development in developing countries following COVID-19, their perceptions of the wealthiness of studying tourism and hospitality programs after COVID-19, and their hope for tourism regeneration following COVID-19. These objectives were pursued in the context of developing countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa, using Malawi as a case study. As was earlier observed by Reichenberger and Raymond (2021), it is critical to conduct such studies in a variety of regions and countries, as the effect of COVID-19 on tourism and the rate of recovery varies considerably. Such studies also ought to be conducted at various educational and training institutions for a better understanding of the subject (Benaraba et al., 2022). Unlike previous studies, the current study focused on students who were on internships during the COVID-19 peak period, with the assumption that they witnessed and comprehended the effects of COVID-19 more than those who were on campus attending classes or at home due to closures of schools. As Appietu et al. (2019) puts it, internships and other forms of work experience impact students' perceptions about careers in tourism and hospitality.

Literature review

The social cognitive career theory

This study is guided by the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) developed by Lent et al. (1994). The core building blocks of SCCT are three closely related variables: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals (Lent et al., 2002). The theory seeks to explain the development of academic and vocational interests, how individuals make educational and career choices, and educational and career performance and stability (Leung, 2008). It is deemed relevant as a theoretical framework for the current study because it explains how individuals make and re-evaluate their career decisions in light of changing individual and environmental factors. The presumption is that COVID-19 has influenced students' professional goals in tourism, causing tourism students to re-evaluate their careers in tourism. In addition, the theory has been widely used for research investigating career choices in high school and universities (Kelly, 2009). The model has also been used to investigate career choices in tourism; for example, Ghuangpeng (2011) used the same framework to examine factors influencing career choices of tourism and hospitality students in Thailand and Australia.

Tourism education and training

Tourism human resource is a critical attribute for the development of a tourism destination (Rosyidi, 2021). The workforce significantly contributes to the tourist experience (Solnet & Hood, 2008). People and their individual interfaces are inevitably critical to the creation of lasting experiences, whether positive or negative (Solnet & Kralj, 2011). Tourism education plays an important role in fostering tourism development and ensuring steady supply of qualified human resources to meet industry needs and requirements as well as tourists' expectations (Lam & Xiao, 2000). The provision of training to workforce is an integral part of the growth and success of the tourism sector (Malik & Vivek, 2018).

Educational institutions play a vital role in the provision of training and formal tourism education to the tourism workforce as well as preparing students for their careers (Benaraba et al., 2022). College students, especially those studying in the field of tourism constitute the potential labour supply for the industry (King & Hang, 2012). Most education institutions across the world have considered tourism as an academic discipline with the aim of providing well trained personnel in the industry so as to reap maximum benefits that tourism brings. Nevertheless, one of the most important aspects of tourism education and training is student perception towards the tourism careers (Anthony et al., 2021). Students who have positive

perceptions of careers are more likely to passionately pursue such careers. Students would want to pursue careers that they perceive to be beneficial and suited to their growth needs. According to Anthony et al. (2021), students' perceptions of careers in tourism vary according to their academic level. According to their study, first-year students perceive tourism careers more positively than continuing students and those who have worked in the industry.

Undergraduate students' perceptions on tourism jobs

Students' perceptions of working in the tourism industry are generally negative, with the majority suggesting that tourism is one of the industries with low wages, little stability, long hours, no job security, high labour turnover, and unfair labour practices (Lacher & Oh 2012; Omar 2014; Rosyidi, 2021; Thetsane et al., 2020). In addition to this, Huang and Lo (2014) and Klusuvan and Klusuvan (2000), stated that tourism is perceived as a stressful profession which also gives a low status in the society. Then the question becomes, why do such people still decide to study tourism and hospitality in the first place? Dewar et al. (2002) provide two possible explanations to the contraction. The first explanation is that most students enter the industry without a comprehensive understanding of tourism and its career prospects until during studies and after internship or part-time job. The second argument is that some understand the industry better but consider tourism employment as a means of advancement to attractive jobs outside the industry (Dewar et al., 2002).

Despite the negative perceptions associated with tourism careers, studies reveal that some students express a favourable view of the industry's career prospects. For instance, a study by Wang and Huang (2014) revealed that some students valued tourism jobs because they allow them to interact with diverse cultures. Additionally, Thetsane et al. (2020) reported that students consider that tourism jobs offer sufficient promotion prospects and there is no discrimination between women and men.

Students' perceptions towards tourism careers and education post-COVID-19

The fact that student perceptions of tourism careers and education have a substantial impact on the development of human resources in the tourism industry underscores the necessity for research on student perceptions in light of COVID-19 and its impact on the tourism industry. Covid impacts have left the majority of higher education students in the dark about their future professional careers (Aristovnik et al., 2020). According to Zhong et al. (2021), these impacts may erode students' confidence and commitment to tourism studies and future industry careers. As mentioned previously, recent studies have set the groundwork for studying student attitudes of tourism education and careers within the contest of COVID-19. Leading studies on the subject used qualitative methods (Reichenberger & Raymond, 2021) as well as a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Benaraba et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2021). Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) conducted the study in New Zealand, Benaraba et al. (2022) in the Philippines, and Shah et al. (2021) in India, and this study presents an African perspective, with a particular emphasis on the Sub-Saharan region.

The findings of the key studies collectively agree that tourism students are aware of the negative effects of COVID-19 on tourism, and how this adversely impacted careers in the tourism industry. These studies, however, differ in that Shah et al. (2021), and Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) concluded that students were optimistic of tourism careers after COVID-19, while Benaraba et al. (2022) reported that students were generally pessimistic. According to Shah et al. (2021), optimistic students believed that the industry would recover in the near future. Despite their optimism, optimistic students anticipated poor working conditions and a business environment marked by decreased job security, retracted offers, exploitation, reduced pay packages, reduced allowances, rare promotions, and longer work hours (Shah et al., 2021).

On the other hand, pessimistic students perceived uncertain career prospects in tourism (Benaraba et al. 2022). Students were reported to be unsure of their career path even after graduation (Benaraba et al., 2022). Their anxiety stemmed primarily from the closure of tourism businesses, travel restrictions, an increased unemployment rate, and a prolonged recovery period, among other factors (Benaraba et al., 2022).

Research context

Malawi was one of the last African countries to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. On 20 March 2020, the President of the Republic of Malawi announced a state of disaster, closing all institutions and universities. Other measures included a 21-day lockdown, the suspension of commercial flights, the reduction of banks' liquidity reserve ratio, and the exemption of some corporate and citizen taxes (Baulch et al., 2020). Due to political intervention and legal injunctions, implementing preventive measures proved difficult as the country re-ran presidential elections on 23 June 2020. Malawi's economy grew at a slower rate of 1.7 percent in 2020, down from 5.7 percent in 2019, before COVID-19. The resultant measures decreased economic activity, particularly in tourism, transportation, and agriculture (ADB, 2021).

Tourism is so highly regarded in Malawi that it is marked as the third priority area in the country's medium-term overarching development strategy, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III (MGDS III) (Malawi Government, 2018). MGDS III recognizes tourism as a sector with immense potential to turn Malawi into a productive, competitive, and resilient nation. Tourism is also featured in Malawi Vision 2063, which outlines the collective aspirations and goals of the country towards the year 2063. According to Malawi Vision 2063, tourism would assist the country in achieving its long-term ambitions by commencing urbanisation of remote areas, thereby empowering rural communities through the creation of high-quality lives and improvements to social and economic amenities (Malawi Government, 2020). Malawi has benefited from tourism, particularly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. International tourism, for example, contributed 6.7 percent to Malawi's GDP (US \$550.9 million) in 2019 and accounted for 6.8 percent of total employment (516, 200 jobs) (WTTC, 2021). However, COVID-19 had a severe impact on tourism, significantly reducing its economic contribution. For example, the pandemic was expected to have a profound impact on the country's general labour market, with an estimated loss of 273,712 to 680,496 jobs, but accommodation and food services were expected to suffer the greatest job losses of any sector, risking losing up to 14.0 percent of their jobs (Baulch, et al., 2020).

Methodology

The study used a phenomenological research paradigm and qualitative methods to collect and analyse data. Qualitative research aims to develop knowledge based on personal experience (Sandelowski, 2004). The study population comprised final year students (year 4) pursuing Bachelor of Science degrees in Tourism and Hospitality Management at Mzuzu University in Malawi who had recently returned from an internship to complete their final semester. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from Mzuzu University before commencement of data collection. This group of students was chosen because they had witnessed and experienced the effects of COVID-19 during their internships and thus had comprehensive knowledge of the implications of tourism status on their careers. These two programmes require students to complete an internship during the first semester of their fourth year and then return to complete the last semester of their respective programmes. The study participants comprised a total of 30 students, with 13 pursuing bachelor's degrees in tourism and 17 pursuing bachelor's degrees in hospitality management as shown in Table 1 below.



Table 1. Summary of participants

Participant Programmes	Male	Female	Total
BSc. Tourism	9	4	13
BSc. Hospitality Management	9	8	17
Total	18	12	30

Data was collected from the entire research population of final year tourism and hospitality management students using an interview guide with semi-structured questions. The interviews were conducted in February 2022 at Mzuzu University's Dunduzu campus where tourism and hospitality programmes are housed. Three of the authors interviewed the students individually and recorded their responses. Interview guide questions were designed to elicit student opinions on the perceived effects of COVID-19 on Malawi tourism, appropriateness of tourism as a strategy for economic development in Malawi following COVID-19, possibility of tourism recovering from the damages caused by COVID-19, their choice of studying tourism and hospitality programs in light of COVID-19, achieving their personal goals through tourism careers, and remaining in the tourism industry or pursuing careers in other sectors following COVID-19.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data. The study followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step process for conducting theme analysis, which Kiger and Varpio (2020) regard as the most extensively used procedure for conducting thematic analysis. Researchers gathered and familiarized themselves with data from the interviews. This was followed by the development of initial codes, the identification of themes, the examination of themes, and the definition and labelling of themes. Students pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Tourism were assigned the letter *A*, whereas those pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management were assigned the letter *B*, such that students *1A* to *13A* were tourism and *students 1B* to *17B* were hospitality management.

Findings and discussions

Student perceptions of Malawi tourism sector recovering after COVID-19

Participants were asked to express their views on whether or not the tourism industry would recover from the effects of COVID-19. Students expressed complete confidence in tourism's ability to recover from the effects of COVID-19. Except for three participants, the majority of students, believed tourism would recover as a result of the administration and public acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines, the decline in COVID-19 cases, people learning to live with the virus as they would with any other disease, and countries opening up for domestic and international travel. According to some, travel restrictions stifled travel demand, and now that the world has opened up, people will travel more after being forced to cancel their travel plans and stay in their homes or familiar environments for a prolonged period. A few students recounted positive experience in the establishments to which they were assigned. "I believe that tourism will recover from the crisis because I have seen the tourism industry return to its former glory recently, where meetings are held and hotels and lodges are always full". (Student 3B)

Although students were optimistic about tourism recovery, they also recognized that it would be a slow process that would necessitate sound strategies for Malawi to attain tourism recovery aspirations. The participating students highlighted that Malawi has a number of strategic options for reviving tourism. Some of the strategies suggested were intensifying marketing and rebranding Malawi to regain tourist confidence in the country, enforcement of COVID-19 preventive measures for tourists as well as service providers, improving stakeholder collaboration, developing current and new attractions, and focusing much on domestic tourism rather than the prior focus on international tourism. However, those who doubted tourism's recovery argued that Malawi's economy is insufficiently stable to support

tourism recovery strategies. These few argued that Malawi's government had failed to develop tourism prior to COVID-19 and that doing so under the current economic challenges will be a tall order. Additionally, they expressed concern that tourism operators are not taking initiatives on their own, preferring to continue using traditional methods, complaining, and waiting for government to intervene.

Similar to Shah et al. (2021) and Reichenberger and Raymond (2021), the majority of the students viewed the impact of COVID-19 on tourism as temporary situation and anticipated for the tourism revival in the near future. Additionally, they recognized the importance of robust recovery strategies such as focusing on domestic tourism, a conclusion that confirms observations by Reichenberger and Raymond (2021). The students' idea that tourism recovery requires sound strategies is shared by many other academics and industry professionals. For instance, McCartney et al. (2022), Seyedabolghasemi et al. (2022) and Wan et al. (2022) espoused cross-sector collaboration to maximize resource base towards recovery programmes. In addition, they recommended the creation of specialized tourism products, the enhancement of targeted marketing, the establishment of niche tourism markets, the initiation of government-led intervention, and the adoption of public-private partnership governance within the tourism industry.

Based on their assessment of the country's ability to implement recovery strategies, a few students expressed despair that tourism would recover. Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) observed a similar tendency among students to evaluate tourism recovery in terms of the country's strategies and commitment. Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) found that the majority of students were optimistic towards tourism recovery in light of the government's and other stakeholders' intentions. On the contrary, this study established that students who questioned tourism recovery did so because they lacked confidence in their country's economic ability to implement recovery plans and strategies successfully. Surely, the position of these students is not outside the spheres of the ongoing debate on the tourism recovery strategies in developing countries. For example, Zimbabwean tourism stakeholders argued that domestic tourism would not work for the country due to the country's economic challenges, which may prevent it from meeting tourism development demands, and the population lacks sufficient disposable income to afford tourism services (Woyo, 2021).

Student perceptions of tourism as a development tool in Malawi after COVID-19

The study sought to establish student perceptions and reflections of tourism as an economic driver following COVID-19. This factor was considered significant for this study because, similar to student perceptions of tourism recovery, it may have influenced students' perceptions of tourism education and careers. All but three participants agreed that tourism is a viable strategy for economic development of Malawi after COVID-19. Participants relied on the belief that tourism would recover with well-thought-out strategies and that Malawi would gain from the widely recognised economic benefits of tourism. The students justified tourism as a good strategy for economic development of the country through the associated economic benefits such as infrastructure development, source of foreign currency, creation of jobs, provision of entrepreneurial opportunities and revenue generation for government. The following are some extracts from respondents expressing this point of view:

Tourism provides opportunities for economic development in the country. Despite the fact that COVID-19 has had an impact on tourism, it remains an important industry for economic growth development of developing countries like Malawi. (Student 11A)

Countries are opening up for international and domestic travel. Countries are gearing up for international and domestic travel. When tourism recovers, so will its benefits. (Student 8A)

The few who disagreed that tourism was a good strategy for the country's economic development based their argument on the belief that tourism would not recover because the tourism industry is not adequately supported due to economic challenges and a lack of government interest in tourism. They also felt that tourism operators are not taking proactive measures to improve performance of their operations.

Even before COVID-19, tourism was not doing well, with the same old plans and operators offering poor services. So, how will it be different after COVID-19? Personally, I believe that tourism will continue to decline. (Student 2A)

Even before COVID-19, there was a lack of government interest in developing tourism. (Student 13A)

The majority's conviction that tourism is a desirable tool for economic growth is based on the widely held belief that tourism has economic benefits. This has been the prevalent ideological viewpoint, and many scholars and professionals have advocated and embraced the thinking. At national level, the Malawi's development plan documents including its long-term plan, Malawi 2063 identify tourism as a critical component that can contribute to the country's socioeconomic development (Malawi Government, 2020). This would provide a basis for the students' disposition that tourism would resurge, and contribute to the much needed economic development. The few students who questioned tourism's suitability to be a vehicle for economic growth contributed to the long-running debate about tourism and economic development in underdeveloped countries like Malawi. Similarly to the minority position, others have claimed that the preconditions for tourism development such as infrastructure development necessitate economic resources that are always scarce in undeveloped countries. For example, Krstic et al. (2016) reported that tourism growth in Sub-Saharan Africa confronts numerous obstacles due to poverty and a lack of interest on the part of the government. Lambulira and Bello (2022) also suggested that one of the causes of challenges to tourism growth in Malawi is insufficient government funding, which forces the government to choose between providing resources to tourism and essential areas such as health and education.

Student reflections on choosing to study tourism

The majority of students believed that acquiring education and training in tourism and hospitality is still valuable and did not regret their decisions to study the tourism programs. The students pointed out that education and training in tourism are still worthwhile because COVID-19 and its effects on tourism are only momentary, and more career opportunities would return once the market stabilises. Some defended their position by stating that tourism and hospitality programmes at Mzuzu University do not confine students to employment and entrepreneurship in the tourism only but rather provide them with competences necessary to seek opportunities in other sectors. Business management courses such as marketing, financial management, strategic management, project management, and human resource management were highlighted as examples of courses that provide students an extra edge when it comes to exploring and exploiting opportunities in other industries. Additionally, the students thought that COVID-19 impacted a wide variety of businesses, not only tourism, and therefore there was no reason to fear as if the pandemic was limited to the tourism industry. As Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) noted, these students may be biased towards tourism because they have already committed to tertiary education in tourism and hospitality.

While the majority of participants expressed positive feelings about studying tourism and hospitality programs following COVID-19, a minority expressed contrary feelings. These individuals believed that studying tourism and hospitality programs was useless and regretted their choice. According to this group of students, it would be extremely difficult for them to obtain jobs in tourism after graduation as the industry is revitalising at a slow pace. It may

appear that such students have lost confidence in the industry having witnessed brutal impacts such as retrenchments, and the industry's demonstrated susceptibility to pandemics. This reinforces Shah et al. (2021)'s observation that some students are worried about their future prospects, having witnessed job loss, work reduction, and inadequate financial benefits. Contrary to Shah et al. (2021) though, Students at Mzuzu University made no mention of concerns regarding safety, security, or exploitation as evidence by some of their views:

The pandemic has shown that the industry is very sensitive to natural factors, so if there is another pandemic, it will also be affected. This shows that it is not worth it to invest in this kind of thing. (Student 16B)

Because we have seen how employers in the hospitality and tourism have retrenched their staffs due to low business, it's really hard to see it as fruitful. (Student 9B)

As Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) discovered, the majority of students did not regret pursuing careers in tourism and hospitality in the hope that tourism would recover. Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) hypothesized that students' positive attitudes toward tourism programs and credentials were explained by their optimism on tourism revival. Additionally, students remain confident about tourism training and certifications due to the multidisciplinary aspect of tourism and hospitality education, which prepares them for careers in disciplines other than tourism. Some Mzuzu University students demonstrated persistence in their decision to study tourism and hospitality programs, thinking that if tourism fails, they can easily transfer their skills to other industries. This finding is in direct consonance with findings by Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) where students hailed business management courses. A multidisciplinary approach to tourism studies enables researchers and professionals to comprehend and manage the industry's complexity, and this finding suggest that it may also build student resilience in tourism studies in times of tourism disruptions and uncertainties.

Perceptions of students regarding attainment of their career goals in tourism

The purpose of this component of the study was to ascertain student career goals in the tourism industry and student perceptions of the possibility of achieving such goals in light of the effects of COVID-19. Some students expressed a desire to find work, while others expressed an interest in starting their own tourist enterprises. There was no significant difference in terms of frequency of responses between individuals seeking employment and those intending to establish their own enterprises. All but two respondents in both categories thought they would be able to achieve their job and entrepreneurial aspirations despite the sector being severely impacted by COVID-19. Their confidence was also grounded on the notion that tourism would rebound and that all that was required were effective strategies and stakeholder commitment to implementing them. They contended that reviving tourism would reintroduce job and commercial possibilities that existed before to COVID-19. Participants observed, however, that capitalising on such prospects would need fresh thinking and creativity on their side.

The goal will be met because the pandemic is nearing its end, and many job opportunities will be created afterwards. (Student 5B)

It's simply a matter of being creative, doing things differently, thinking of something that will work in the current situation. (Student 4A)

The minority who felt it would be impossible or difficult to fulfil their goals in tourism based their position on the belief that tourism would not easily recover or might take long time to recover. Hence, tourism benefits such as employment and entrepreneurship would equally take time to be fully enjoyed. The views shared by the pessimistic students who perceived their career opportunities in the tourism industry as uncertain, are consistent with the findings by Benaraba et al. (2021). On the other hand, the majority of students believed they would be able to achieve their career goals in tourism, a view which corroborates with Shah et al. (2021).

According to Shah et al. (2021), students believe that the tourism industry would recover and, as a result, desire to pursue their long-term career plan in the tourism.

Student reflections on changing their careers to other industries

To further understand student perceptions and fears about tourism careers, the study sought to determine whether students are considering changing careers from tourism and hospitality to other industries. Unlike the other components discussed previously, the proportion of participants determined to remain in the industry and those considering pursuing careers in other industries was almost equal. Those who stated they had no intention of changing careers argued that they enjoyed working in the industry, tourism was reviving and there was no reason to leave, they had already advanced in their studies in tourism and hospitality and changing careers would be a waste of financial resources and time, and they believed the industry in Malawi is in poor state and needs rejuvenation, a phase that requires well-trained personnel like them. The following are some excerpts from the participating students that demonstrate the aforementioned findings:

I am passionate about tourism and hospitality. It is my profession, and I am very proud of it. All that is required is careful planning for uncertain issues that may arise. (Student 17B)

...because I want to use the knowledge I have gained from the tourism program to change the state of tourism in our country (Student 5A)

I did not choose this profession because I was redirected during the selection process. All the same, I have developed an interest in the profession over the years, and I will not give it up. (Student 12A)

As mentioned previously, some students considered careers outside the tourism and hospitality sectors. The students could be classified into two categories based on their motivations: those seeking a career change as a result of COVID-19 and those contemplating a career change for reasons other than COVID-19. Participants who pondered changing careers as a result of COVID-19 claimed that tourism has demonstrated sensitivity to global issues, leaving them fearful for the future. Thus, departing for more stable industries or diversifying one's career was deemed safer. Those considering changing occupations for reasons other than COVID-19 considered doing so just to broaden their survival options in Malawi where economic environment is very turbulent and uncertain. In addition, some intended to change careers because they had never desired to study tourism or hospitality programs but were redirected through Malawi's national centralized admission process of public universities. For these students, and the four years of studying tourism programs did not instil in them a passion for the industry. This was evident from the responses with some highlighting that:

Tourism has proved to be very sensitive, which makes the future uncertain; what if COVID-19 does not disappear? What if a new pandemic erupts? I will surely change my career to other industries. (Student 2A)

I had chosen to study something else, but I was then selected to study tourism. I thought I had developed an interest in it, but after pursuing the industrial attachment, I still feel I am in the wrong field. (Student 4A)

I did not choose this industry in the first place; it has nothing to do with COVID-19. (Student 2B)

The study also unearthed that some students receive pressure from their families. On this point, the students pointed out that their parents want them to graduate and immediately get a decent job, support themselves, their parents and other family members. Not only do the family members have high expectations of them as university graduates; the whole community does, and that graduates who fall short of their expectations are mocked and not respected.

Recognising that tourism may take time to recover, and some students prefer to switch careers to other industries that would immediately improve their social status and ability to support their families.

The students' considerations on whether to stay or pursue careers in industries other than tourism may have culminated from their reflections on experiences during industrial attachments. This premise concedes the view that industrial attachments have a positive (Appietu et al., 2019) or negative (Richardson, 2008) impact on student's perceptions and career choices. It does not, however, provide sufficient evidence to take a clear position on the debate. Unlike Shah et al. (2021) and Reichenberger and Raymond (2021), this study established that students expressing an interest in staying or leaving permanently were nearly identical. This is to some extent contradictory to the preceding findings that the majority of students did not regret studying tourism and hospitality programs, and that majority of students believed that they would achieve their career goals in tourism. Richardson (2008) identified a similar paradox when a greater majority of students claimed to enjoy working in the industry and yet stated a desire to pursue jobs in other fields. Such a range of contradictory responses makes it more difficult to interpret the students' position in that regard.

Amissah et al. (2020) contended that many tourism and hospitality graduates aim to work in higher-paying sectors immediately after graduation or shortly afterwards. This might be because tourism and hospitality employment do not satisfy their expectations or those of their families and community members. These students, as Maxwell et al. (2010) assert, place a high value on remuneration and job security. Indeed, some Mzuzu University students considering a career change from tourism raised worries about unsatisfactory monetary job benefits that do not meet the obligations and income development that graduates are expected to achieve in Malawian families and society.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to ascertain tourism and hospitality students' perspectives of tourism education and careers in light of COVID-19 catastrophic consequences on tourism. A number of aspects were explored in order to acquire a comprehensive picture of students' impressions about tourism education and careers. The study assessed students' perceptions of tourism as a veritable tool for Malawi's socioeconomic development after COVID-19; whether they believed tourism would revive following COVID-19; whether they regretted studying tourism; whether they hoped to achieve their career goals in tourism; and whether students considered leaving tourism and hospitality for careers in other sectors.

The majority of students believed that tourism would recover, but that it would require sound recovery strategies. The student perception of tourism downturn as temporary reaffirms the findings of Shah et al., (2021) and Reichenberger and Raymond (2021), but deviates from the findings of Benaraba et al., (2022), in which students expressed uncertainty. Their optimism was fundamental to their favourable evaluations of tourism as a development tool in Malawi, as well as their positive feeling of tourism educational and career opportunities. They considered tourism to be still relevant for economic growth since they anticipated it to reinvigorate, bringing with it economic opportunities and career prospects. Aside from their confidence for tourism recovery, students' favourable opinions of tourism education and anticipated qualifications were influenced by a multidisciplinary study approach to tourism, particularly the inclusion of business management courses. In the event that tourism fails to return and suit their expectations, students intended to take advantage of alternative prospects in industries other than tourism.

The minority who did not believe tourism would bounce back in the near future concluded tourism was not an appropriate development strategy for economic growth and

expressed remorse over their choice to pursue tourism and hospitality programs. The students doubted tourism recovery in Malawi mainly because they questioned country's economic capability and government interests towards implementing tourism recovery strategies. Reichenberger and Raymond's (2021)'s study also indicates students' inclination to appraise a country's recovery in order to define their own hope for recovery and career opportunities. Surprisingly, not only those who are pessimistic of tourism recovery expressed intention to explore careers outside tourism upon graduation. Many of those who indicated optimism about tourism recovery, tourism education, and employment prospects also stated a desire to pursue opportunities outside of the tourism industry.

The study offers suggestions designed to increase students' confidence in tourism and tourism-related careers. Beginning with training institutions, they should implement or enhance programmes and activities aimed at comprehending the perceptions and fears of students and restoring their emotional state. They should also intensify career guidance and counselling for students by engaging them in career-related discussions. In addition, it is suggested that universities develop measures to ensure enrolment of motivated students, as they may be more resilient. Motivated students are likely to become motivated employees, and motivation is a trait highly valued by the industry (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). In addition, universities should consider modifying their curricula to increase the relevance of tourism and hospitality qualifications in light of industry-driven changes. Government and industry stakeholders should increase students' awareness of tourism recovery interventions and success stories, in addition to establishing clear guidelines and policies for tourism recovery. Given the dearth of trained workers in the tourism industry of Malawi and other developing nations, initiatives aimed at retaining students within the tourism industry are preferable to those that encourage students to pursue career opportunities outside of tourism.

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