

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Career motivation and perceived challenges of upcoming tourism professionals on customer care and management skills

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is increasingly demanding highly adaptable and skilled new graduates who can meet the evolving needs of the sector. As the industry becomes more competitive and customer-oriented, employers seek graduates who possess not only academic knowledge but also practical competencies such as effective communication, cultural sensitivity, problem-solving abilities, digital literacy, and customer service excellence. This study explored career motivation and perceived challenges of new tourism graduates in Eastern Visayas regarding customer care and management. New graduates (n=18) were purposively sampled to be interviewed in this study. The study found that fresh tourism graduates were primarily motivated by a strong passion for service, a desire for personal growth, and the pursuit of stable careers in a growing industry. They viewed customer care roles as emotionally fulfilling and essential for developing interpersonal skills and leadership potential. Many were intrinsically driven by empathy, purpose, and the opportunity to create positive guest experiences. However, they also anticipated several challenges, including managing difficult customer behaviors, bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world practice, and coping with the pressure of performance metrics. They felt unprepared to handle long working hours, multitasking under pressure, and meeting the expectations of demanding employers with minimal onboarding or mentorship. These concerns reflected a need for better emotional preparedness, practical exposure, and institutional support to help graduates transition successfully into the demands of the tourism and hospitality workforce.

Keywords: Career motivation, customer care, employment anxiety, management skills, tourism industry

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1. Introduction

The Philippines is showing potential for tourism and hospitality development, driven by its rich natural landscapes and cultural heritage. With its world-renowned beaches, diverse ecosystems, and UNESCO-listed historical landmarks, the country continues to attract millions of international and local travelers annually^[1]. In recent years, the global rise of experiential tourism has positioned the Philippines as a prime destination for adventure and eco-tourism experiences^[2]. This trend has fueled the expansion of niche tourism sectors, including agri-tourism and cultural immersion programs, emphasizing ongoing efforts to diversify tourism offerings^[3].

Given the immense potential of the Philippines to become a leading global tourism and hospitality destination, new graduates entering the industry are expected to be dynamic, well-prepared, and future-ready professionals. However, recent local analysis discovered some challenges that hospitality management students encountered, including scheduling conflicts, transportation issues, and financial burdens that disrupted their time and focus. They also face interpersonal struggles, especially in forming effective relationships with peers and supervisors^[4].

After graduation, students often manifest different signs of employment anxiety. Rather than being a stable psychological trait, employment anxiety is typically seen as a transient emotional state triggered by specific environmental conditions^[5]. It is often described as an emotional response that surfaces when graduating students confront the possibility of unfavorable employment outcomes that fall short of their expectations^[6]. This response may either intensify with increasing stress or subside once the situation improves. At its core, this form of anxiety stems from students' uncertainties about their personal competencies, labor market trends, and long-term career trajectories.

This paper analyzed the career motivation and perceived challenges of new tourism graduates about their entry into the dynamic and competitive tourism and hospitality industry. It explored how their personal aspirations, educational background, and exposure to industry practices influence their desire to pursue and sustain careers in the field.

A critical developmental factor in early adulthood is the sense of self-efficacy^[7], which studies define as an individual's capacity to evaluate personal abilities, demonstrate competence, and manage adversity effectively^[8]. This construct of self-efficacy is cultivated through direct experience (empirical efficacy), observational learning (social modeling of successful behaviors), external encouragement (social persuasion), and the reduction of stress accompanied by the cultivation of an optimistic outlook^[9]. In addition, there are several other key psychological traits necessary in the job search process, like achievement motivation, proactive disposition, and receptivity to novel experiences^[10]. When an individual lacks these characteristics, they often fail to land on a sustainable career.

Research indicates that a moderate degree of employment anxiety can serve as a motivating force, enhancing an individual's potential, improving self-perception of competence, and encouraging proactive engagement in the competitive job market^[11]. Conversely, excessive employment anxiety may result in heightened emotional distress, a sense of helplessness, and the development of psychological obstacles that negatively impact both physical and mental well-being, ultimately increasing the likelihood of employment failure^[12].

While earlier studies have primarily focused on external strategies such as reducing employment stress and implementing psychological interventions^[13,14] there has been limited exploration of the underlying psychological mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of employment anxiety. There is a limited body

of scholarly work that explores the career motivation and perceived challenges faced by tourism graduates in the Philippine context. This study aims to fill this research gap by investigating the factors that drive tourism graduates into pursuing their careers, as well as identifying the barriers they encounter in transitioning from education to professional employment.

While previous research has examined employment anxiety and motivation in general business or hospitality programs, few studies have focused specifically on Philippine tourism graduates navigating customer care and management roles. This research addresses that gap by exploring how these graduates' emotional preparedness, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy interact as they transition into the tourism workforce.

2. Literature review

Career motivation has long been a central construct in understanding how individuals select, commit to, and sustain their chosen professions. It encompasses the underlying aspirations, goals, and values that drive one's career decisions and professional engagement^[15]. Psychological and behavioral determinants such as career resilience, decision-making self-efficacy, occupational stress, and indecision are strongly associated with individuals' levels of motivation and satisfaction in their chosen fields^[16,17]. These internal mechanisms often shape the way graduates perceive opportunities, manage uncertainty, and pursue career advancement.

According to Turda^[18], career motivations can be broadly classified into three types: active (e.g., genuine interest and enthusiasm), passive (e.g., lack of alternative options), and material (e.g., economic or working condition incentives). Similarly, other scholars proposed a comparable typology distinguishing intrinsic motivations (personal fulfillment and competence), extrinsic motivations (financial rewards or social recognition), and altruistic motivations (commitment to community or service)^[19,20]. Chui et al.^[21] further consolidated these perspectives into three dominant domains—*intrinsic, extrinsic, and passive* motivations—highlighting intrinsic motivation as a key determinant of long-term professional commitment and learning outcomes^[22,23].

Within the Philippine context, hospitality and tourism students are typically motivated by both personal and pragmatic factors. At Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, for instance, students are drawn to the field for its perceived career security, enjoyment, and potential for personal and professional growth^[24]. Work-related aspirations such as high-paying opportunities, international mobility, and entrepreneurial prospects reinforce their commitment, while institutional access and a genuine passion for service contribute to sustained motivation throughout their studies. This reflects a hybrid form of motivation—combining intrinsic passion with extrinsic aspirations for stability and advancement.

However, following graduation, many students experience a decline in motivation as they confront employment anxiety, a psychological state marked by distress and uncertainty regarding future employment prospects^[25]. This anxiety stems from fears of job-market competition, financial instability, and perceived skill-job mismatches^[26, 27]. While a moderate level of anxiety can act as a motivational force that encourages preparation and resilience^[28], excessive anxiety often leads to detrimental outcomes such as diminished life satisfaction, reduced self-esteem, and psychological distress^[28-30]. These findings emphasize the need to understand how emotional regulation and psychological preparedness affect graduates' transition to employment.

In the tourism and hospitality sector, employability plays a crucial mediating role between motivation and employment anxiety. Ngoepe and Wakelin-Theron^[31] describe employability as a set of essential competencies that enable individuals to maintain and advance in their careers. This “employability capital”

includes both technical and soft skills—communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence—that enhance workplace effectiveness^[32, 33]. Emmanuel and Olayinka^[34] further argue that employability represents a multidimensional asset integrating personality traits, meta-skills, and job-specific expertise. Yet, employment anxiety can erode this capital by undermining confidence, decision-making, and initiative during the job search process^[35]. Students burdened by anxiety may avoid experiential opportunities such as internships, training, and networking—activities crucial for building practical competencies^[36].

Collectively, the reviewed literature underscores a significant intersection between career motivation, emotional well-being, and employability. However, despite extensive research on these constructs in general business and education contexts, limited studies have examined how these dynamics manifest among Philippine tourism graduates, particularly in relation to customer care and management roles. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding how intrinsic motivation and emotional preparedness shape graduates' transition from academic training to the professional tourism environment.

3. Objectives

This study analyzed the beliefs and perceptions of new graduates about the tourism industry to identify markers of motivation and apprehension. Below are the specific objectives of this study.

1. To explore the motivations of fresh graduates in pursuing careers in tourism and hospitality, particularly in relation to customer care and management roles.
2. To examine the anticipated challenges faced by upcoming tourism professionals in applying customer care and management skills in real-world industry settings.

4. Methods

4.1. Research design

This paper explored the motivation and perceived challenges of new graduates of tourism courses towards customer care and management skills. Exploratory research is frequently applied to investigate novel or underexplored subject areas, providing essential understanding of emerging issues^[37, 38]. This method often uses organized strategies that could help in identifying meaningful trends and patterns within datasets^[39,40]. This allows for a coherent examination of sociocultural and psychological constructs relevant to the topic being studied^[41, 42]. While concerns have been raised regarding the consistency and reliability of exploratory designs, recent scholarly discussions emphasized their value in enriching theoretical insight and enabling the systematic acquisition of qualitative evidence^[43, 44]. This paper addressed one critical question in tourism education: do students feel motivated and prepared in the advent of an increasingly complex service landscape, where customer care requires not only technical proficiency but also emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive communication skills?

4.2. Participants and sampling

It is common for exploratory studies to have a small number of participants to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of pertinent concepts relevant to the study^[45]. The goal of exploration is to give in-depth understanding of a defined population, rather than seeking statistical generalizability across a broader demographic^[46]. The size of the sample remains adaptable, primarily influenced by the capacity of participants to offer substantial and contextually meaningful information, as well as by the attainment of data saturation^[45,47]. In qualitative studies, purposive sampling serves as a prevalent technique for selecting participants^[48], wherein individuals are identified and included through a systematic and intentional process based on their relevance to the research objectives^[49]. Online purposive sampling^[50] was carried out to

sample the participants through the distribution of Google Forms that gather preliminary data. Four specific characteristics were considered in the selection of participants: (1) a graduate of a tourism-related degree program during the academic year 2024–2025, (2) no prior work experience in the tourism or hospitality industry, (3) willingness to participate in an in-depth interview, and (4) availability during the data collection period. There were 35 individuals who responded to the online screening, but only 18 were selected to be interviewed.

Although the sample size ($n = 18$) appears limited, this is consistent with qualitative exploratory designs where depth of insight and contextual richness are prioritized over numerical representation^[45]. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged, supporting the adequacy of the sample size. Consequently, the study's conclusions are intended to be transferable to similar contexts rather than statistically generalizable.

The participants represented graduates from several public universities across the Eastern Visayas. This institutional diversity enhances the contextual representativeness of findings, as each institution varies in curriculum emphasis and industry exposure. The multi-campus composition thus provides a collective snapshot of Philippine tourism education.

4.3. Instrumentation

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed to ensure a systematic approach to data collection. Its design adhered to a framework proposed by Kallio et al.^[51] that involved essential phases such as identifying study prerequisites, conducting a comprehensive review of relevant literature, generating preliminary questions, implementing a pilot study, and improving the instrument in accordance with expert input. The interview guide incorporated probing items intended to elicit detailed responses^[52]. In addition, the interview protocol underwent a rigorous expert validation process to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the collected data^[53]. Three professionals with expertise in qualitative research, a tourism instructor, and classroom management officer were invited to evaluate the instrument. Their review focused on the clarity, coherence, and alignment of the questions with the study's objectives, as well as the suitability of the probing items. Lastly, a pilot test was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and capacity of the questions to generate meaningful and in-depth responses^[54]. Revisions to the final instrument were informed by insights from both the expert reviewers and pilot participants (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Final interview guide questions asked during the interview

Objectives	Interview Questions
To explore the motivations of fresh graduates in pursuing careers in tourism and hospitality, particularly in relation to customer care and management roles.	1. What inspired you to pursue a career in tourism or hospitality, especially in roles that focus on customer care and management? 2. How do you personally define excellent customer service, and why is it important in your career choice? 3. What aspects of customer care and management excite or motivate you the most as you enter the tourism industry?
To examine the anticipated challenges faced by upcoming tourism professionals in applying customer care and management skills in real-world industry settings.	1. What challenges do you expect to face when applying your customer service and management skills in actual work environments? 2. How prepared do you feel to handle difficult customer situations, and what areas do you think you still need to improve? 3. What concerns do you have about transitioning from classroom learning to real-world practice in customer care and management?

4.4. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the principal method for data collection to elicit participants' perspectives, behaviors, and shared interpretations in a comprehensive manner. This guided interview format

was designed to have data accuracy and adaptability needed for conducting inductive, in-depth dialogues^[55], making it particularly suitable for exploratory research inquiries^[56, 57]. Participants were selected through online purposive sampling, and inclusion was governed by predefined eligibility criteria to ensure alignment with the objectives. Upon identification, potential participants received formal invitations and were scheduled for individual interviews. Each session followed a systematic protocol through informed consent procedures, ethical safeguards, confidentiality assurances, and structured data handling processes^[58].

During the one-on-one interview process, the participants were encouraged to communicate in the language they found most comfortable to minimize linguistic barriers and build engagement^[59]. Probing strategies, like asking more details about their personal experiences, were utilized to uncover underlying meanings and enrich the depth and clarity of the information obtained^[60]. With permission from participants, all interviews were securely recorded using encrypted mobile devices. Initial observations and emergent themes were then systematically documented in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to facilitate the subsequent stages of qualitative analysis.

4.5. Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to examine the qualitative data gathered through individual interviews. This method involved organizing, coding, and interpreting textual information, to enable the systematic extraction of insights grounded in participants' lived experiences^[44]. Due to its flexibility, reflexive thematic analysis is particularly suitable for exploratory studies, as it facilitates the inductive development of themes rather than relying on predetermined theoretical frameworks^[61]. First introduced by Braun and Clarke^[62], this method follows a series of phases, including familiarization with the data, the generation of initial codes, identification and refinement of themes, articulation of thematic definitions, and final synthesis of findings (see **Figure 1**). A cornerstone of this approach is the principle of reflexivity, which requires researchers to engage critically and continuously with the data while reflecting on their positionality to enrich depth^[63,64]. To further minimize the influence of potential researcher bias, an inductive method was maintained, ensuring that thematic outcomes remained anchored in participants' personal perspectives^[65,66]. This process allowed for the natural emergence of themes, preserving the integrity of participant narratives and building richly layered, contextually relevant interpretations.

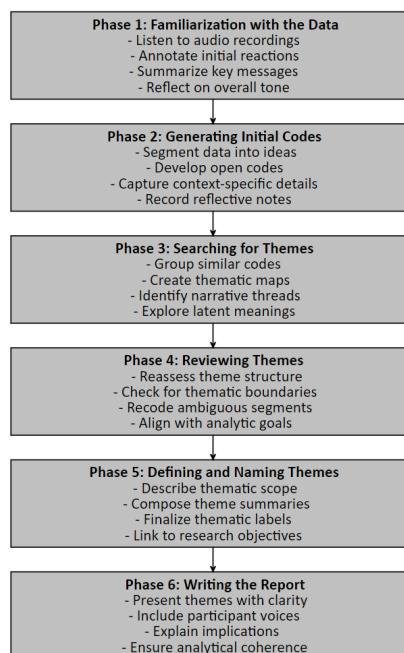


Figure 1. How reflexive thematic analysis was conducted in the study

5. Results

Objective 1: To explore the motivations of fresh graduates in pursuing careers in tourism and hospitality, particularly in relation to customer care and management roles.

Theme 1: Passion for Service

Most of new graduates expressed an intrinsic motivation rooted in altruism and service-oriented behavior. The sense of fulfillment was closely linked to improving others' experiences, suggesting an emotional investment in customer satisfaction.

“I’ve always enjoyed helping people. It just feels natural to make someone’s day better, and tourism gives me that chance every day.”

For example, they were primarily motivated by the visible emotional impact of their service on others. The emotional validation received through guest satisfaction served as a powerful driver of vocational choice. They demonstrated a high sensitivity to guest responses, which suggested a strong orientation toward empathy and emotional intelligence. In hospitality, such emotional attunement is essential for effective customer care and relationship management.

“Seeing a guest smile because of the service I gave is what drives me to pursue this career.”

“Customer care is where I feel I can express my empathy and patience, and that gives me purpose.”

There was also a perception about hospitality as a social- and human-centered profession rather than a purely service one. Graduates appeared to seek emotional fulfillment and intellectual stimulation from the variety of guests encountered in tourism roles. For them, they viewed every guest not merely as a customer, but as a person with a story worth engaging.

“For me, hospitality is not just a job. It’s about building real connections with people from all walks of life.”

Lastly, some engaged themselves in voluntary services before stepping into the industry, which showed their willingness to contribute to social changes. Their engagement in unpaid service roles demonstrated intrinsic motivation and a proactive approach to developing hospitality-related competencies. This motivation was vital for sustaining high levels of performance in emotionally demanding roles such as customer care.

“Even in college, I volunteered for events because I love being in service roles. It energizes me.”

Theme 2: Desire for Personal Growth

Some viewed the dynamic nature of the tourism and hospitality industry as a fertile ground for facing varied challenges that could improve their skills. For the newly graduates, personal growth is often driven by dealing with complexity and unpredictability. Consequently, it revealed a preference for environments that demand responsiveness and interpersonal finesse.

“I want to grow in a field where every day presents new challenges. I know hospitality will push me to improve.”

One participant noted that working in hospitality not only improves technical competencies, but it nurtures personal qualities such as patience, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Such insight suggested that

their motivation to enter the industry can be linked with psychological and emotional growth as they believed that every customer interaction as a lesson in composure and integrity.

“Dealing with customers in different situations builds not just skills, but also my character and confidence.”

“This industry gives me room to develop professionally and personally; it’s not stagnant.”

In addition, they had a conscious decision to start at the ground level and master interpersonal dynamics before aspiring to be part of management. They appeared motivated by a long-term vision of becoming a leader equipped with both technical knowledge and emotional intelligence. In order for them to achieve this, they wanted to start from the bottom and work their way up.

“I see customer care roles as stepping stones to leadership as well as learning to manage people starts with learning to serve them.”

Some associated tourism with multi-role exposure, international mobility, and diverse workplace environments. They were driven by its potential to provide a dynamic and fulfilling career trajectory that supports long-term personal development.

“I wanted a job that would help me grow, not just stay in one position forever. Tourism gives me that path.”

Theme 3: Career Stability in a Growing Industry

Their decision to pursue a career in tourism was firmly grounded in a pragmatic assessment of industry trends, particularly within the Philippine context where tourism significantly contributes to economic development. Their choice highlighted not just a desire for employment, but for sustainable and scalable professional engagement. Consequently, their responsiveness to socio-economic indicators implied that personal goals might be shaped by national development narratives.

“Tourism is a growing field, especially here in the Philippines, so I saw it as a practical and stable career choice.”

For example, participants appeared to value career fields that offered flexibility in initiation and continuity in advancement, allowing for evolving professional identities over time. Similarly, the potential for cross-functional movement within the industry likely contributed to their belief in long-term sustainability.

“I chose this path because there are so many entry points and chances to stay long-term in the industry.”

Some of the new graduates acknowledged the resilience of the industry. For them, instability was not seen as a challenge but rather as evidence of the underlying strength of the tourism sector. They have awareness of the consistent demand for different roles within the tourism and hospitality industry, particularly those grounded in interpersonal interaction and service excellence. Their career motivations were influenced by a desire for steady, accessible employment pathways with minimal risk of obsolescence.

“Even during tough times, the industry always finds a way to bounce back. That’s what makes it secure for me.”

“Customer service roles are always in demand, so I know I’ll never run out of opportunities.”

“The pandemic showed how adaptable tourism can be, and that gives me confidence in its future.”

Objective 2: To examine the anticipated challenges faced by upcoming tourism professionals in applying customer care and management skills in real-world industry settings.

Theme 1: Handling Difficult Customer Behavior

Most new graduates expressed their apprehension about the emotional volatility of real-world encounters in the tourism industry. Consequently, there might be insufficiency of training environments for new graduates as the education system primarily focused on theoretical dimensions of customer care and management. It also pointed to a need for structured psychological resilience training, as the stakes in hospitality are not just operational but also affective.

“I’m worried about how I’ll handle rude or aggressive guests because we only practiced ideal situations in school, not real confrontations.”

They expressed an awareness that professionalism in customer service is not merely a function of technical knowledge, but also of emotional intelligence and conflict de-escalation skills. It suggested that emotional control remained difficult to execute without repeated exposure to stressors. This tension further indicated that calmness under pressure was a skill that required more than instruction as it needs experience, reflection, and feedback.

“Some customers can be very unreasonable, and I’m not sure yet how to keep calm and professional when emotions are high.”

For example, there was minimal emotional preparedness among new graduates. Students were not coached on how to manage situations where professionalism must be upheld despite being the target of customer hostility. The lack of preparation for such situations could result in anxiety, reduced morale, and diminished service quality, particularly among early-career professionals.

“We learned about customer satisfaction, but no one really prepares you for when a guest yells or blames you for something beyond your control.”

“It’s challenging to meet expectations when guests are already frustrated before even talking to you.”

The demand for emotional labor, like smiling through stress, remaining kind through confrontation, posed a significant psychological challenge, particularly for those at the beginning of their careers. For them, there is moral complexity of enduring disrespect in the name of professionalism, a dilemma that may erode self-worth or lead to burnout over time. The expectation to remain emotionally composed and pleasant, even in the face of mistreatment, reflected the often-invisible labor that underpins high-quality service delivery.

“I think the real difficulty lies in maintaining a cheerful attitude when the guest is clearly upset or disrespectful.”

Theme 2: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

While classroom learning provided them with the necessary knowledge, new graduates also acknowledged that the real-world environment operates at a significantly higher pace and intensity. Theoretical learning alone was insufficient in equipping them for the emotional and cognitive pressures of actual customer interactions. This means that soft skills, such as adaptability and emotional regulation, should be more deliberately integrated into training

“What we studied in class was helpful, but the real work setting feels completely different. It’s faster, more stressful, and less forgiving.”

The emotional labor required to maintain professionalism and empathy with strangers was viewed as a daunting prospect. For them, engaging with unfamiliar individuals introduced a level of psychological vulnerability, which can be characterized by high self-consciousness and fear of judgment. Although their program provided them with the opportunity to learn about how to deal with these scenarios, it still lacked the emotional stakes and variability present in real-world interactions

“In school, we had role-plays with classmates. In the industry, I’ll be dealing with people I don’t know, which makes it scarier.”

“We were taught the proper way to handle guests but applying that under pressure is something I haven’t experienced yet.”

Some also was afraid of making mistakes when they were deployed in real-world tourism industry. For example, quick decision-making and multitasking are the norms in the industry, which can disrupt even their well-maintained knowledge. This apprehension may then impair judgment and lead to errors

“I’m afraid that when I’m finally on the floor, I’ll forget the steps or do something wrong because things happen so quickly.”

While theoretical knowledge equips students with structured frameworks, it often fails to address the unpredictable and emotionally complex scenarios that characterize actual guest interactions. This means that confidence was not merely a personality trait but a cultivated skill, shaped through exposure, feedback, and long-term social experience.

“There’s a big difference between knowing customer care in theory and doing it confidently in a live setting with real consequences.”

Theme 3: Pressure to Meet Performance Metrics

New graduates also had concern about the rigid and often unforgiving nature of performance-based evaluation in the tourism and hospitality industry. The reliance on quantifiable satisfaction metrics, such as guest ratings or post-stay surveys, created anxiety rooted in the fear of failing to meet institutional benchmarks. This fear indicated an internal pressure to meet standardized expectations even before experiencing the workplace.

“I heard that in hotels, staff have to meet satisfaction ratings, and I’m nervous that I might fall short and get in trouble.”

“The idea of being constantly evaluated based on guest feedback or review scores adds pressure that we didn’t experience in college.”

For example, some pointed out that in educational settings, emphasis was placed more on the correctness and completeness of customer service processes rather than the efficiency or speed with which they were executed. This belief introduced a fear of underperformance due to a lack of preparedness in time-sensitive situations.

“We were never graded on speed in school, but I know in the real world, timing and efficiency are everything.”

In college, evaluations typically based on instructors who provided guided feedback, whereas in the professional setting, the judgment comes from paying clients whose opinions may directly influence

reputations and job security. They believed that these might be subjective, inconsistent, and influenced by factors beyond their control.

“Sometimes I worry that I’ll focus too much on meeting the numbers and forget to really connect with the guests.”

Lastly, they also showed fear in comparing themselves with other employees who perform better. For a novice in the field, this kind of competitive benchmarking could undermine self-esteem and heighten imposter syndrome. Hence, the culture of comparison and ranking might overshadow collaboration and mutual learning.

“There’s pressure to not only do well, but to do better than others. That kind of competition can be overwhelming for someone just starting out.”

6. Discussion

The findings addressed both research objectives by (1) exploring the motivations of fresh graduates in pursuing careers in tourism and hospitality, particularly in relation to customer care and management roles, and (2) examining the anticipated challenges faced by upcoming tourism professionals in applying customer care and management skills in real-world industry settings.

This study explored the perceptions and motivation of new tourism graduates about working in the tourism industry. Career motivation is widely recognized as a key driving force behind individuals' decisions and behaviors aimed at achieving both their personal goals and the broader objectives of the organization^[67]. Fresh graduates of tourism programs were primarily driven by intrinsic motivations such as a passion for service, the pursuit of personal growth, and a pragmatic desire for career stability, viewing tourism as both emotionally fulfilling and professionally sustainable.

It has been suggested that an individual's intention to pursue a career in a particular industry significantly shapes their future level of commitment within that field^[68]. The aspiration to assist others and the sense of personal fulfillment from providing care have been recognized as significant intrinsic motivators shaped by previous work experiences^[69]. One tourism graduate noted that their motivation to pursue a career in tourism is shaped by their willingness to help and assist their customers. For him, “...it just feels natural to make someone's day better, and tourism gives me that chance every day.” Such motivation suggests a deeper alignment between the individual's self-identity and the values promoted by the tourism industry, such as customer care, responsiveness, and creating memorable experiences. When a professional identifies emotionally and ethically with their role, they are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of job satisfaction, adaptability, and persistence in the face of challenges^[70].

Some new graduates were driven by their desire to pursue personal development and growth in the tourism industry. For instance, a person who acquires new competencies for the purpose of personal growth demonstrates intrinsic motivation. This form of motivation is influenced by various internal factors, including self-actualization, genuine interest, and personal satisfaction^[71]. In such cases, the individual independently initiates, regulates, and maintains their actions with the aim of attaining self-driven rewards, rather than relying on external incentives. New graduates believed customer care as the “...stepping stones to leadership as well as learning to manage people starts with learning to serve them.” Many graduates saw the tourism sector as an environment where they could improve their soft skills, such as empathy, communication, and adaptability, which they believed were crucial to long-term career success. They recognized that dealing with guests and resolving customer-related concerns offered real-world opportunities to develop emotional intelligence and resilience. These components of self-knowledge are essential as they

help in shaping the professional self-determination of future specialists, and enable them to understand their own potential, current attributes, intellectual capacities, personality characteristics, and interpersonal relationships^[72].

Students' motivation in the tourism industry is primarily characterized by intrinsic factors such as a passion for service, the pursuit of personal growth, emotional fulfillment, and a strong alignment with values like empathy, customer care, and professional development. However, they also anticipated significant challenges, particularly in handling emotionally charged customer encounters, bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, and coping with the pressure of performance metrics and competitive workplace environments.

Wang, Pan, and Wang^[73] noted that the shift from university life to professional employment is one of the most critical and challenging phases in a young adult's development. New graduates of the tourism program presented some notable signs of employment anxiety. For example, one graduate said that it is very difficult to maintain a cheerful attitude when the guest is upset or disrespectful to them. Such experiences can lead to internal stress, especially for those who are still adjusting to the realities of workplace dynamics.

One notable component of employment anxiety among new graduates was their fear of uncertainty. They anticipated difficulties in adjusting to the fast-paced nature of the industry, which demands both high levels of competence and emotional resilience. Psychological characteristics, particularly intolerance of uncertainty, have emerged as significant indicators of employment anxiety among college students^[74]. Intolerance of uncertainty was a strong positive predictor of employment anxiety in graduates, with career planning serving as a moderating variable. Tourism graduates expressed apprehension about their ability to handle unpredictable workplace scenarios, such as sudden changes in guest expectations, demanding workloads during peak seasons, and the pressure to deliver exceptional service in unfamiliar or high-pressure environments. Many feared being unprepared to meet the industry's high standards, especially when faced with difficult guests or crisis situations that required immediate problem-solving and emotional regulation.

Although recent graduates of tourism programs demonstrated enthusiasm for building careers in the tourism sector, there remains a clear need to enhance emotional training initiatives that equip students with the skills necessary to adapt to the industry demands. For example, many graduates expressed difficulty in managing emotional responses when faced with high-pressure situations, such as dealing with irate customers or balancing multiple tasks during peak seasons. This indicates the need for programs that focus on emotional regulation, stress management, and conflict resolution, which are essential for maintaining professionalism and composure in demanding service environments^[75].

The latter part of the second decade of the 21st century has been marked by intensified global competition within the tourism industry. The quality of education, primarily shown in students' competencies, motivation, professional behavior, and overall preparedness, is largely influenced by the qualifications and expertise of the academic personnel delivering instruction^[76]. However, local labor markets often encounter challenges in recruiting teachers who possess the necessary credentials and experience to cultivate tourism graduates with advanced and industry-relevant qualifications. A strategic integration of university-based theoretical frameworks with the applied insights of seasoned industry practitioners is regarded as a vital factor in enhancing the quality of tourism education. Therefore, it is essential to attract academic staff who not only fulfill rigorous scholarly standards but also demonstrate practical success in tourism or in allied fields such as economics, business management, and marketing^[77,78].

Clearly, there is a pressing need to integrate resilience-building components into tourism curricula. The inherent unpredictability of the tourism industry, especially in the context of global crises, demands that

workers remain flexible and mentally strong. Institutions can support this by offering workshops or modules on mindset development, mindfulness practices, and reflective learning. Educators should ensure that graduates not only enter the workforce with motivation but also with the tools to thrive and grow within it.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for tourism educators, industry partners, and policy developers. For educators, the results underscore the importance of integrating emotional intelligence, stress regulation, and conflict de-escalation training into customer care and management courses. Embedding experiential learning methods—such as role-play simulations, on-site practicums, and industry mentorship programs—can help bridge the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. For employers and industry partners, the study highlights the need for structured onboarding programs, peer mentorship, and rotational exposure to support graduates as they transition into professional roles. Developing supportive evaluation systems that emphasize professional growth, collaboration, and emotional well-being over punitive performance ratings can further strengthen employee retention and satisfaction. Finally, for policy makers and curriculum developers, the findings suggest the necessity of strengthening partnerships between tourism schools and industry sectors to ensure curricula remain responsive to evolving industry expectations. Institutional efforts to promote continuous faculty development and the inclusion of resilience-building programs within higher education policies can help cultivate emotionally prepared, adaptable, and professionally competent tourism graduates who are ready to meet the complex demands of customer care and management roles.

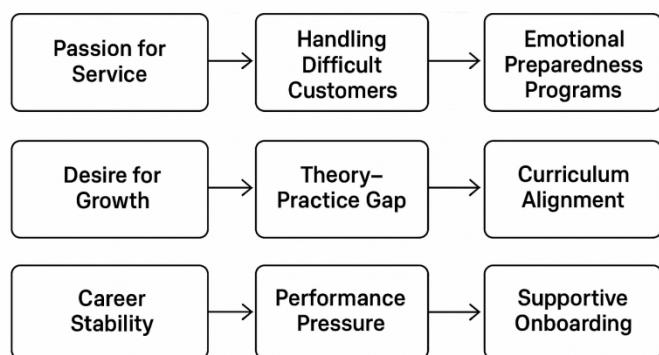


Figure 2. Conceptual map showing relationships among motivation themes, anticipated challenge themes, and practical implications

7. Conclusion

This study explored the motivation and apprehensions of new tourism graduates. The findings revealed that new tourism graduates were largely driven by intrinsic motivations, including a deep passion for service, the desire for personal and emotional growth, and a pragmatic view of tourism as a stable and evolving industry. They viewed customer care roles not just as jobs, but as opportunities to make meaningful connections, gain emotional fulfillment, and contribute to others' experiences. Graduates also associated their career paths with opportunities for continuous development, diverse experiences, and leadership progression, demonstrating a long-term commitment to mastering interpersonal and emotional competencies.

Despite their enthusiasm, graduates expressed serious concerns about transitioning into real-world industry settings. They anticipated emotional challenges when dealing with difficult customers, managing fast-paced workloads, and meeting performance metrics. Many felt unprepared for the emotional labor required in the field, such as maintaining professionalism during conflict or stress. Graduates also feared making mistakes under pressure, being evaluated harshly by guests, and struggling with confidence compared to more experienced peers. The gap between theoretical training and practical demands

highlighted the need for more experiential learning and emotional training in academic programs. This emphasized the importance of integrating resilience-building and emotional intelligence into tourism education to better prepare students for the realities of customer service roles.

One of the primary limitations of this study lies in its relatively small sample size, which may affect the breadth and depth of the findings. The participants were limited to a select group of tourism graduates from a specific academic institution, using purposive sampling to capture their experiences and perceptions. While this approach enabled a focused and context-rich exploration of employment anxiety and intrinsic motivation, it limits the generalizability of the results to the broader population of tourism graduates in different regions, schools, or cultural settings. Importantly, because the study relied heavily on self-reported data through interviews, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias or selective memory. As the participants were pre-employment graduates, their responses reflect anticipated rather than experienced workplace challenges. This characteristic defines the study's exploratory scope and underscores the need for future longitudinal research once participants gain field experience. Future research should consider adopting a mixed-methods design to validate and expand upon these findings. Larger and more diverse samples, including graduates from various academic institutions and geographic locations, could enhance the representativeness and external validity of the research. Lastly, longitudinal studies may provide a clearer picture of how employment anxiety evolves over time and how intrinsic motivation influences long-term career outcomes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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