



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Tourism

A REVIEW OF FEMALE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE TOURISM EDUCATION

KEY WORDS: Tourism Education, Female Students, Career Perception, Gender Roles.

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ABSTRACT

Tourism education has gained momentum in India, attracting a growing number of undergraduate students—particularly women—interested in careers aligned with cultural engagement, interpersonal interaction, and global mobility. However, despite high enrolment rates, the transition of female students into long-term tourism careers remains limited and inconsistent. This study undertakes a comprehensive literature survey to examine the perceptions, motivations, and deterrents influencing female students' engagement with tourism education. Drawing on theoretical perspectives such as Social Cognitive Career Theory, Gender Role Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study organizes findings into five major themes: perceived career value, gendered social expectations, the role of internships, emerging digital and sustainable tourism niches, and the mismatch between academic preparation and industry expectations. The analysis reveals that while many female students enter tourism education with enthusiasm, they are often discouraged by societal norms, safety concerns, limited mentorship, and low perceived status of tourism careers. Internships, when structured positively, can enhance commitment, but poor or gender-stereotyped placements often reinforce existing doubts. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for curriculum reform, gender-sensitive career guidance, and stronger academic-industry partnerships to create inclusive and empowering environments for female students. It also identifies critical research and policy gaps, advocating for empirical investigations into intersectional and regional dynamics that shape women's career pathways in tourism. This literature-based inquiry contributes to a deeper understanding of the gendered dynamics in tourism education and offers actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and industry leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Tourism, as one of the most rapidly growing global industries, not only contributes substantially to national economies but also serves as a dynamic arena for cultural exchange, sustainable development, and employment generation. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2022) highlights that the tourism sector contributed approximately 10% to global GDP and accounted for more than 330 million jobs worldwide before the COVID-19 pandemic. In India, the sector has rebounded post-pandemic with commendable resilience, contributing around 9% to national GDP and employing over 40 million individuals (Ministry of Tourism, 2024). However, despite these promising numbers, a persistent issue remains—gender disparities in participation and career progression, especially among educated female youth.

While tourism education in India has evolved significantly—with over 850 institutions now offering tourism-related programs (Growth Source Labour Market Clarity Report, 2020)—female students continue to experience structural, social, and perceptual barriers to full participation in tourism careers. Notably, female enrolment in tourism programs may be proportionally high, yet their transition into sustained professional roles in the sector remains disproportionately low. This disconnect points to deeper challenges in how female students perceive the value, security, and growth opportunities within tourism as a career path.

Problem Statement

Even with multiple government policies encouraging equal opportunities in education and employment, the Indian tourism sector continues to experience gender-based occupational imbalances. A considerable body of research shows many female tourism graduates either leave the industry or disengage within a few years (McKercher et al., 1995; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005). Issues such as employment uncertainty, societal misconceptions, scarcity of women in guiding positions, safety concerns related to travel-oriented jobs, and minimal career progression add to the low appreciation of tourism jobs among female students (Amit & Priyadarshan, 2022; Mqwebedu et al., 2022). These factors contribute to the stark underemployment of skilled women in an industry that is largely dependent on social interactions.

Need for the Study

Understanding the nuanced perceptions of female undergraduate students toward tourism education is essential in reshaping both academic curricula and industry policies to foster greater inclusion. The existing body of literature largely aggregates student perspectives without adequately accounting for gendered experiences. Given the demographic and socio-cultural diversity of India, where traditional expectations often influence career decisions, it is imperative to examine how tourism education is interpreted, received, and acted upon by female students specifically (Bakshi et al., 2012; Grace Anthony et al., 2021). The study is particularly relevant in the post-pandemic era, where career priorities are shifting and new digital and entrepreneurial avenues in tourism are emerging, yet gender disparities may persist unless consciously addressed.

Aim of the Study

This study seeks to understanding female undergraduate tourism students' perceptions, motivations, and barriers towards engagement in tourism education. It hopes to establish recurring narratives from the biographies and professional life of female students through an extensive literature review to interpret the sociocultural and personal structures guiding their professional ambitions. Ultimately, it aims at informing policies and strategies designed by educators, institutional planners, and industry stakeholders towards developing frameworks that are sensitive to the needs of women to actively participate and assume leadership roles in tourism.

2.Theoretical Framework

The framework focuses on understanding the phenomena through which female undergraduate tourists perceive the education and career prospects in tourism. Integrating concepts from career development, gender studies, and educational psychology, it seeks to explain the attitudes, motivations, and barriers to participation of female students. The framework is developed based on Social Cognitive

Career Theory (SCCT), Gender Role Theory, and The Theory of Planned Behaviour which all strive to explain the complex reality surrounding the educational and career choices of women in tourism.

2.1 Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), SCCT articulates the process of interest formation, educational and occupational decision-making, and career achievement. Important to SCCT are the constructs self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectation, and personal goals, each shaped by culture and gender as well as supportive or inhibiting contexts.

For this study, self-efficacy refers to female students' perceptions of their ability to succeed in tourism occupations, which are often influenced by competencies, role models, and exposure to relevant coursework. Vu (2020) identifies factors such as income, job security, flexibility, and social esteem as outcome expectations which also yield social value. In pursuing these goals, perceived barriers, such as safety concerns, stagnant career progression, and gender discrimination, may negatively impact commitment to set goals and a professional career (He & Wong, 2015).

2.2 Gender Role Theory

Gender Eagly's Gender Role Theory (1987) explains that men and women's behaviours, attitudes, and roles have been ascribed to them by society. These roles are absorbed during socialization and are reinforced through systemic frameworks such as educational and occupational institutions.

As a profession, tourism is considered to be strenuous in nature and often requires demand, physical mobility as well as strenuous, non-standard work hours (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). These characteristics tend to clash with the feminine gender roles, particularly in conservative, rural Indian contexts (Bakshi et al., 2012). This theory can also illustrate why some female students do not pursue certain positions in tourism or overestimate barriers to succeeding in these roles due to preconceived notions of limitations, irrespective of their academic interest or capabilities. This perspective enables conducting the study to strongly analyse how deeply held constructions of gender norms shape the attractiveness and appropriateness of tourism careers for women.

2.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

- Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991) laid out a psychological model to anticipate personal action intentions and behavior based on three elements: attitude towards the behaviour, subjective social norms, and perceived behavioural control.

In this Theory,

- Attitude involves the perceptions and evaluations expressed by female students towards tourism career options. (e.g., exciting vs. unstable; prestigious vs. stigmatized).
- Subjective norms include social influences such as parents, peers, faculty, and media, which may encourage or discourage tourism as a viable profession.
- Perceived behavioural control relates to students' beliefs about their ability to enter and succeed in the tourism workforce despite barriers.

TPB is particularly valuable in understanding how intention to pursue a tourism career translates into actual behaviour, helping to bridge the gap between aspiration and action.

2.4 Integrative Model for the Study

The combination of SCCT, Gender Role Theory, and TPB affords a more comprehensive scope for analysing female students' perceptions of tourism education. This model captures the interplay of individual agency, through self-

efficacy and attitude, social frameworks (norms, gender), and external context (the quality of education and opportunities in the industry).

This approach allows investigating gender-specific social dynamics, enabling gender-specific analysis of social dynamics

3. Literature Review

The available literature on female tourism education focuses on the relationship between their academic ambitions, career goals, societal perceptions, and structural challenges. Despite the fact that there are numerous international career opportunities in the tourism sector, women's interest in the field, especially in more conservative societies, is often dampened by cultural norms, safety issues, and the perceived lack of career advancement opportunities. To aid in understanding the scholarly work regarding women's participation in tourism education and their career pathways, I have organized the relevant literature under five distinct themes.

3.1 Female Enrollment in Tourism Education

Women all over the world are a considerable demographic of practitioners in tourism education. Female participation in undergraduate tourism programs is on the rise in India. This is in line with the findings of the Ministry of Tourism (2023) and the NSDC (2020) as they reported an increase in female enrolment in these programs. This growth is linked to the image of tourism as a field that requires personal interaction, cultural participation, and hospitality— functions often associated with women (Airey & Tribe, 2005).

Although enrolment figures are encouraging, experts have pointed out that a significant proportion of graduates leave the industry. For example, McKercher et al. (1995) noted that more than 60% of the women tourism graduates in their research succumbed.

3.2 Perceived Value and Attractiveness of Tourism Careers

Tourism careers are often perceived as glamorous, offering opportunities for travel, interaction, and cultural exposure. Yet, for many female students, these initial impressions are tempered by concerns over job insecurity, low wages, irregular hours, and limited advancement opportunities (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Grace Anthony et al., 2021).

Hoque and Ashif (2020), in their study of Bangladeshi tourism students, found that while female respondents valued the cultural and service aspects of the field, they ranked job prestige and long-term career development as lower than other industries such as banking or IT. Similarly, Amit and Priyadarshan (2022) noted that female students in India increasingly view tourism as a transitional rather than permanent career, especially after internships reveal the physical and emotional demands of hospitality roles.

3.3 Influence of Gender Norms and Societal Expectations

Gender norms significantly shape career choices in India and other patriarchal societies. Bakshi et al. (2012) and Kazi & Akhlaq (2017) emphasized that parental expectations, community norms, and societal perceptions of gender-appropriate work influence students' decisions long before they enter higher education.

Tourism, often involving travel, late hours, and customer-facing roles, is viewed by many Indian families as unsuitable for women. As a result, female students may face active discouragement from pursuing careers in the field, or feel internal conflict between professional ambition and societal approval (Fisher & Griggs, 1995). Furthermore, cultural stereotypes that associate leadership and managerial roles with male traits reinforce gender segregation within the sector (Eagly, 1987; Wilson & Wilson, 1992).

3.4 Role of Internships and Industry Exposure

Internships serve as a critical bridge between academic learning and professional experience, often shaping long-term career perceptions. Mqwebedu et al. (2022) highlighted the dual nature of internships: for some female students, positive experiences led to heightened motivation and industry engagement; for others, negative encounters—particularly involving gendered treatment or harassment—acted as significant deterrents.

Vu (2020) and Seyitoglu (2019) found that structured internships with mentorship opportunities had a particularly strong impact on female students' self-confidence and career commitment. Conversely, the lack of female supervisors or role models during internships contributed to uncertainty about long-term fit within the industry.

3.5 Emerging Trends: Digital Tourism and Female Empowerment

Recent literature points to a generational shift in how young women view tourism careers. Aspects such as digital entrepreneurship, remote work, and niche tourism sectors (e.g., ecotourism, wellness tourism) are increasingly seen as empowering and flexible career avenues (Ayuningsih & Taghulih, 2024).

Digital platforms have democratized access to tourism markets, allowing female students to envision careers beyond traditional hotel or tour operator roles. Blogging, virtual tour curation, and social media marketing offer creative and scalable opportunities, particularly attractive to students who value autonomy, mobility, and work-life balance.

Nevertheless, access to these new roles requires technical training, digital literacy, and supportive educational environments—areas still underdeveloped in many Indian tourism curricula (Growth Source Labour Market Clarity Report, 2020).

The literature confirms that while female students are increasingly enrolling in tourism education, their perceptions of the industry as a viable, long-term career remain cautious and conditional. Influences such as societal norms, internship quality, safety concerns, and the perceived mismatch between expectations and industry realities shape their career intentions. Future academic programs and industry partnerships must therefore focus not only on enrolment but also on empowerment, safety, mentorship, and visibility of women within the sector.

4. Research Methodology

The methodology of this study is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm, specifically employing a systematic literature survey approach to explore female students' perceptions towards tourism education as a career pathway. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research question, a literature-based approach is appropriate for synthesizing existing empirical and theoretical insights, identifying gaps, and framing future research agendas.

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive element focuses on documenting existing knowledge regarding female students' attitudes and challenges in tourism education, while the exploratory dimension seeks to uncover under-researched themes and emerging trends related to gender-specific career perceptions. The literature review functions not only as a review but also as primary data, analyzed thematically.

4.2 Data Sources

The data for this research was drawn exclusively from secondary sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles from databases such as

Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar

- Reports from international tourism bodies such as the UNWTO and WTTC
- Government documents such as India Tourism Statistics (2023) and the NSDC Growth Source Labour Report (2020)
- Academic books and dissertations on tourism education, gender studies, and career psychology

Inclusion Criteria

- Publications dated between 2010 and 2024
- Studies focused on tourism education, student perceptions, and/or gender dynamics in education or employment
- Research with identifiable relevance to the Indian or similar socio-cultural contexts

4.3 Method of Analysis

The analysis followed a narrative synthesis method, structured around recurring themes identified in the literature. The process involved:

1. Categorizing literature into five key themes: (i) enrolment trends, (ii) perceived value of tourism education, (iii) gendered social influences, (iv) internship and work experience, and (v) emerging opportunities for women.
2. Thematic coding to extract patterns and trends related to female students' perceptions, motivations, and barriers.
3. Comparative interpretation of regional and global findings, particularly studies from South and Southeast Asia, to draw culturally relevant parallels.

This approach allowed for the construction of an integrated, evidence-based understanding of how female students engage with tourism education and perceive its career outcomes.

The chosen methodology is appropriate for the objective of building a theoretical and conceptual understanding of the gendered perceptions toward tourism education in India. The insights derived through this literature-driven approach are expected to lay the groundwork for more targeted empirical investigations and policy interventions aimed at improving the participation and progression of female students in the tourism sector.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Given the nature of this study as a literature-based inquiry, data analysis involves the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of themes across diverse scholarly and institutional sources. The analysis is structured around five core themes that emerged consistently in the reviewed literature, each reflecting different dimensions of how female students perceive tourism education and its viability as a career pathway.

5.1 Theme 1: Ambivalence Toward Tourism Careers

The literature reveals a dual perception among female students toward tourism education. On one hand, many are attracted to the interpersonal, cultural, and travel-related aspects of tourism careers (Grace Anthony et al., 2021; Vu, 2020). On the other hand, recurring themes of job insecurity, erratic working hours, and limited advancement opportunities create hesitation (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Amit & Priyadarshan, 2022).

Notably, the perceived low status of tourism work in Indian society was identified as a deterrent for female students from middle-income families, who often face pressure to pursue more "prestigious" professions (Bakshi et al., 2012). This ambivalence often leads to tourism being viewed as a transitional or backup career rather than a primary aspiration.

5.2 Theme 2: Gendered Barriers and Social Expectations

A consistent theme in the literature is the impact of gender

norms and patriarchal expectations on female students' career choices in tourism. Studies by Kazi & Akhlaq (2017) and He & Wong (2015) demonstrate that many young women internalize societal beliefs that tourism—especially roles involving late hours, travel, or physical labour—is unsuitable for them.

Parental influence also plays a critical role. In Indian and similar South Asian contexts, fathers are often cited as primary decision-makers, and their reluctance can shape a student's willingness to pursue tourism careers (Bakshi et al., 2012). These gendered pressures often result in female students limiting their aspirations to "acceptable" sectors such as teaching or administrative hospitality roles.

5.3 Theme 3: Internships as a Turning Point

Internship experiences emerged in the literature as a decisive factor in shaping female students' perceptions. Structured and positive internship experiences often strengthen students' career commitment, while exploitative or stereotyped placements (e.g., being assigned receptionist or assistant roles) reinforce doubts about long-term prospects (Mqwebedu et al., 2022).

In several studies (e.g., Vu, 2020; Seyitoglu, 2019), female students who were mentored by women professionals or exposed to leadership roles during internships reported increased confidence in their ability to thrive in the industry. Conversely, a lack of role models and supervision during internships led many to reconsider tourism as a viable career path.

5.4 Theme 4: Emerging Aspirations in Digital and Sustainable Tourism

A growing body of recent literature points to the evolving interests of Gen Z female students toward digital and sustainable tourism sectors. Opportunities such as travel blogging, virtual guiding, social media marketing, and ecotourism align well with their desire for flexibility, entrepreneurship, and alignment with personal values (Ayuningsih & Taghulihi, 2024).

Unlike traditional hotel and travel agency roles, these newer sectors offer a sense of agency and innovation. However, the literature also notes that access to these roles is often mediated by digital literacy, socio-economic privilege, and institutional support—creating potential inequalities within the cohort of female students.

5.5 Theme 5: The Gap Between Curriculum and Industry Expectations

Multiple studies underscore a persistent mismatch between academic training and real-world industry demands (Airey & Tribe, 2005; Growth Source Labour Market Report, 2020). Female students, in particular, express a need for more practical exposure, leadership training, and guidance on navigating male-dominated workplaces.

This disconnect contributes to feelings of unpreparedness and marginalization, especially during the transition from academia to employment. The lack of gender-sensitive pedagogy and career counselling is cited as a barrier to developing resilience and strategic career planning among female students.

Findings as per the themes

Theme	Key Insights
Ambivalence Toward Careers	Dual attraction and deterrence; tourism seen as transitional.
Gendered Barriers	Patriarchal values, family expectations, and gender norms limit career ambitions.
Internship Experience	Positive internships with mentorship boost retention; poor placements discourage continuation.

Digital Aspirations	Digital tourism offers new hope, but access is uneven.
Academic-Industry Gap	Curriculum lacks real-world and gender-responsive training.

Interpretation

The analysis illustrates that while many female students begin their tourism education with enthusiasm, their career perceptions are shaped—often negatively—by a range of interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors. The presence or absence of support structures such as mentorship, inclusive internships, and family encouragement significantly affects career continuity.

Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of intersectionality—gender interacts with socio-economic status, geography, and institutional access to influence career decisions. These complex layers must be acknowledged in both educational policy and industry practice to build a more inclusive and equitable tourism workforce.

6. Conclusion, Implications, and Future Directions

6.1 CONCLUSION

Through an extensive literature review, this study aimed to analyse the perception of female undergraduate students regarding tourism education. With regards to the findings, it is evident that although tourism as an academic field is gaining popularity with female students, severe psychological, social, and organizational barriers still persist which diminish its attractiveness as a career option. The prospects of cultural involvement, interaction, travels serve as the initial pull factor to enrol in tourism programs.

However, deep-rooted gender roles, societal norms, lack of perceived safety, low wages, poorly defined advancement opportunities, and limited prospects often result in diminished motivation and increased attrition. The research also emphasizes the importance of internships and other forms of experiential work integrated learning to actively shape—positively or negatively—the career choices of female students.

At the same time, some niches like digital tourism and sustainable travel are starting to change this perception, as they offer more freedom, control, and alignment with one's values. These opportunities, however, are not equally accessible due to varying levels of digital skills, institutional preparedness, and socio-economic status.

Thus, while tourism holds promise as a gender-inclusive industry, the sector's full potential cannot be realized without addressing the structural and perceptual challenges female students face during their academic journey.

6.2 Implications

For Academic Institutions:

- **Curriculum Revision:** Gender-sensitive modules, leadership, and digital tourism training ought to be added to the existing courses on tourism in universities.
- **Career Counselling:** Specialized counselling services need to be developed for the female students to assist them in effectively dealing with the industry's realities and strategically planning their career paths.
- **Mentoring:** The students can benefit from having female practitioners in tourism to serve as role models and mentors.

For Policy Makers and Government Bodies:

- **Equal Opportunities:** The Ministries of Tourism and Education should establish policies that ensure equitable access for all trainees, surveillance free work environments, harassment training, and anti-bullying session.
- **Gender-focused Entrepreneurship Programs:** These initiatives need to be intensified within the frameworks of

Hunar Se Rozgar and IITFC, giving special attention to the entrepreneurship training and fostering sustainable businesses for women.

- **Promotional Programs:** Promote tourism vocations to women, particularly those living in rural and semi-urban areas.

For Industry Stakeholders:

- **Safe Employment Policies:** The sector should implement gender-inclusive policies in human resources, offering flexible hours, and eliminating job title bias.
- **Supervised Self-Directed Internships:** Develop partnerships with universities to create programs that allow students to undertake supervised self-directed internships with specific learning outcomes.
- **Stories Women Leaders:** Showcasing the success stories of women in tourism leadership can shift societal narratives and inspire newcomers.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

While the study provides a strong theoretical foundation, it is limited by its reliance on secondary data. The absence of primary data restricts the ability to capture current, lived experiences of students across diverse educational and geographic contexts in India. Moreover, publication bias and a lack of intersectional data (e.g., caste, religion, or urban-rural background) may constrain the generalizability of the findings.

6.4 Future Directions

Future Research Should Focus on:

- **Empirical Fieldwork:** Conducting interviews, focus groups, and longitudinal studies with female tourism students to validate and expand upon the literature-based findings.
- **Intersectional Analysis:** Exploring how other identity markers—such as class, religion, or geography—interact with gender to influence career perceptions.
- **Comparative Studies:** Cross-national comparisons between India and other emerging tourism economies could offer valuable policy lessons and contextual benchmarks.
- **Impact Evaluation:** Assessing the effectiveness of specific interventions—such as mentorship programs or policy reforms—on female students' career outcomes in tourism.

CONCLUSION

As India aspires to become a global tourism hub, the inclusion and empowerment of its female workforce is not just an ethical imperative—it is a strategic necessity. Tourism education institutions must evolve from being mere knowledge providers to active enablers of gender equity. This study contributes to that vision by illuminating the voices, choices, and challenges of female students, whose aspirations and agency hold the key to shaping a more inclusive and dynamic tourism future.

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