

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CAREER PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY STUDENTS BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract:** This study determined and compared the career perceptions of Tourism and Hospitality undergraduate students, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an emerging economy country, the approach is mixed methods and simple purposive random sampling technique. Responses from 212 students enrolled in the year 2022-II were obtained for the quantitative analysis. The Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney test showed that the null hypothesis is rejected since the overall career perception was  $p = 0.000000159$  and "p" is less than 0.05, so there is a significant difference in the career perception of students before and during the pandemic. For the qualitative part, through the interview guide, the results revealed that students perceive that the situation of the tourism industry has been severely affected; their career opportunities were entirely uncertain. Finally, it is proposed to implement a career opportunities program that caters to the desires and needs of the students to help them adapt to current events.

**Key words:** Covid-19 pandemic, Career Perception, Tourism Industry, Career Opportunities for Students, Career Opportunities for Students Program.

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### INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, tourism has been considered a driver for socio-economic progress (World Tourism Organization, 2022). With the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (COVID-19), a respiratory infectious disease, a severe socio-economic crisis was generated, which started in Wuhan (China) in December 2019 and spread to other countries in February of the following year, causing negative impacts of various kinds, transforming the lives of people around the world, including students and higher education institutions (HEIs) and the like (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Sá and Serpa, 2020; Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021).

Tourism in Peru fell very quickly. In 2019, 4.4 million international tourists arrived, and, in 2020, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 0.9 million arrived, making tourism one of the hardest-hit sectors (Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism, 2022). However, during this year, 2022, tourism will continue to reactivate, and the GDP contributed by the tourism sector is estimated at 2.5% (Expreso, 31.01.2022, 1). The pandemic affected university students emotionally, professionally, and occupationally (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Research showed that COVID-19 increased university students' concerns about their careers, challenging universities to develop knowledge and skills and build perceptions about their future careers, innovation, curriculum change, and implementation for effective learning and motivation to continue the tourism career (Mahmud et al., 2021; Wathelet et al., 2020). With all that has happened, undergraduates of Hospitality and Tourism at a private university in Northern Lima face the challenge of dealing with the consequences of this disease. Amid uncertainty about their professional career, Educational Institutions should provide adequate assistance so that future professionals can achieve their goals, being important to understand their perceptions towards the tourism industry (Anandhwanlert and Wattanasan, 2016). This study poses the following research question: What is the career perception of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Several theories have emerged regarding the career perception variable. Bordean and Sonea (2018) point out that perception alludes to being aware and comprehending something. They also mention that it is a process of organization and selection where students, through their interests, aim to achieve their professional goals in their future career choice. Menon

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and Santha (2017) state that career perception is what a person longs for or desires regarding the career to achieve to develop in the future. It is related to an individual's goal to achieve the chosen profession. Every individual, at some point, will face the choice of a career, and then it will mark his or her entire life.

It is worth mentioning that many students do not decide to study Hospitality and Tourism because of factors such as unemployment, low salaries, unstable schedules, lack of guaranteed working conditions, and part-time and seasonal work (Mahmud et al., 2021; Chang and Tsé, 2015; Wu et al., 2014, Jiang and Tribu, 2009; Roney and Oztin, 2007). In its effect, qualified professionals are not working in the tourism industry due to the high turnover of staff and lack of trained employees, resulting in low job satisfaction and, consequently, less qualified staff (Anandhwanlert and Wattanasan, 2016; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021). It is highlighted that quality in the tourism industry depends on attitudes; committed, motivated, and trained workforce; performance and behavior of employees, being key determinants for customer satisfaction and loyalty (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; López-Guzmán et al., 2019; Espinoza-Molin et al., 2022).

Masdonati et al. (2017) stated that it is necessary to understand the subjective reasons for a career change. There are five reasons: the desire to achieve better working conditions, dissatisfaction with their current situation, dealing with health problems, the search for personal growth, and the desire to have an occupation following the individual's vocation.

Giné (2009) points out that students' perception influences their preparation in school, as they grasp the theoretical teaching in a practical way in the work experience. The quality of education affects the perception of Tourism students and impacts their expectations, as well as the perception of job quality. Njoroge et al. (2015) stated that students should have purposes and objectives where schools will form their professional growth, such as self-knowledge that should be taught, thus achieving an increase in subsequent years (Novack et al., 1999; Gándara, 2004; Kunwar, 2018).

To support the career perception indicators, the researchers relied on different studies and identified five: availability of career opportunities, work environment, compensation and benefits, skills and competencies, professional growth, and personal development (Üngüren and Yigit, 2022; Benaraba et al., 2021; Ortiz and Coromina, 2021; Wathélet et al., 2020; Akosah et al., 2018; Seibert et al., 2016; Avey et al., 2010; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018).

The availability of career or professional opportunities in the tourism industry by Rasheed et al. (2020) stated that they are employees' expectations regarding their job responsibilities related to their career preferences and priorities. Sheng (2020) mentioned that, in the United States, the hospitality industry was found to be highly affected as many employees were laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Asefa et al. (2020), the work environment in a study conducted with waiters resulted in more than fifty percent having a higher perception of becoming infected during the pandemic, causing them stress. A negative professional event may cause unexpected changes, triggering a deliberate thought process. Social support from supervisors can mitigate the adverse effect of job stress. However, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity to improve personal aspects and professional development (Zikic and Richarson, 2007; Riofrio-Carbajal et al., 2023; Seibert, 2013; Akkermans et al., 2020). Financial remuneration is among the most influential extrinsic and motivational factors when young people choose a profession (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Agarwala, 2008; Machuca-Vilchez, et al., 2023; Wüst and Leko, 2017). Njoroge et al. (2015) noted that students find common motivations such as salary and good working conditions. Likewise, Fuletti (2012) states that, in an organization, remunerations are one of the payments, and benefits are a desirable complement for any employee. In an economically unfavorable situation, it becomes difficult to adjust the payment to the collaborator, who must be recognized for the contribution made and thus perform effectively for the company's growth.

For Bordean and Sonea (2018), in the study of skills and competencies, where students were surveyed about their future career intentions, leadership skills are important, making them more likely to work as managers in the tourism industry. Their study identified the skills that predict future intentions within the tourism sector. They also point out that universities should consider the factors that generate satisfaction among students, such as study programs, strengthening of relations with companies, and professional internships. Likewise, universities should improve the learning process to help tourism students achieve their future business or management careers.

The development of skills should match the interest of the individual, and production should be enhanced to combine both the skills and interests of each collaborator (Nyamwange, 2016). Theron et al. (2018) concluded that tourism graduates lack soft skills, causing them to be neither employable nor efficient.

Cortés et al. (2017) started a curriculum in the Faculty of Medicine of the Autonomous University of Mexico, integrating the competencies from the first year of studies. Within the eight competencies is "personal development and growth." An instrument that evaluated the skills of medical students during their course of study in a practical way was created for their feedback. The study is relevant for all professional careers, such as Tourism, since it is related to the progress of the potentialities that the person can achieve. The study made it known that students should work with the professional help of their student house in their personal growth and development, being fundamental for professional formation. Nyamwange (2016) concluded that students' interest influences their career decision.

The study presents the following hypotheses of the study: **HO:** There is no significant difference in the career perception of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and **H1:** There is a significant difference in the career perception of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research scope was descriptive, with a mixed approach and a non-experimental, cross-sectional design. For the quantitative approach, the type of sampling used was simple, random, and probabilistic. The survey technique was applied, and the instrument used was a questionnaire composed of 25 questions based on the Likert scale. On the other hand, an

interview guide was used, and the sampling technique was intentional for the qualitative approach. Thus, five (05) students from the fifth to the tenth semester of the Hospitality and Tourism career, enrolled during the second semester of the academic year 2022-II, were selected. They are characterized by being student leaders, participating actively in competitions, and demonstrating good academic performance. They also openly expressed their opinions on topics of interest as participants of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The total population is 280 students. The sample consisted of 212 students (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This study provided the researchers with unbiased results, both objective and subjective.

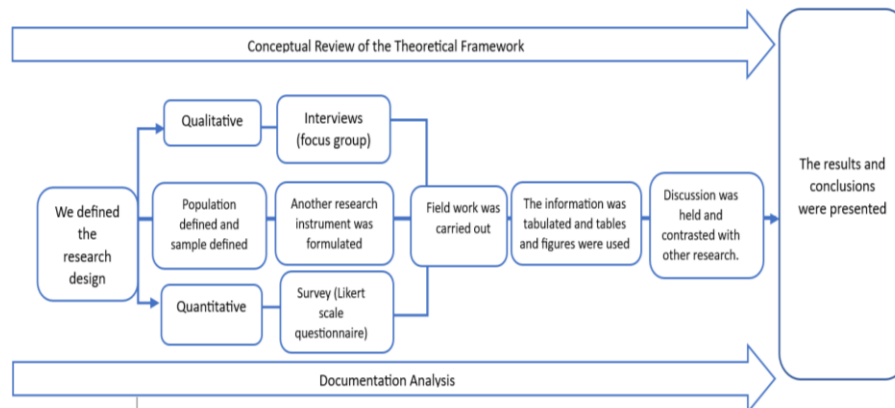


Figure 1. Flowchart of steps of the methodology used

The instrument consisted of two parts. The first part contains the demographic profile of the participants including: (1) Sex, (2) Age, and (3) Semester. The second part presents twenty-five (25) items on career perception, using a 5-point Likert scale, equivalent to 5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree, where respondents were provided with indicators and statements to determine their career perception before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2). In addition, the Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney test was used to determine whether the null hypothesis was accepted or rejected. In the case of qualitative questions, a semi-structured interview guide was used in the Focus Group (FGD), validated by four expert professors of the Hospitality and Tourism career. The qualitative method allowed the researchers to gather different points of view and deeper perspectives to answer the research questions, such as students' perceptions about the situation of the tourism industry during the pandemic, their career opportunities during the pandemic, and students' proposals to help them pursue their career in the tourism industry.

The data collection required the application of the survey, conducted virtually through Google Forms and in person, in the classrooms of the Hospitality and Tourism career, at a private university in Northern Lima. For qualitative data, the interview was conducted virtually through Google Meet and applied to five preselected students for being student leaders with good academic performance. The information was collected through an audio recording.

For the analysis of quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, the respective analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics (v 25). A descriptive analysis was performed using pivot tables and graphs from the results with alternatives on the Likert scale. For the inferential analysis, the normality test was evaluated before using any statistic for hypothesis testing, using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Accordingly, the Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney test for non-parametric samples was used to determine whether the null hypothesis was accepted or rejected. Subsequently, the quantitative research questions were answered. It was shown that there is a significant difference in the career perception of students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1). For the qualitative part, with the information collected through the online interview (google meet) and the audio recording, the researchers identified, codified, grouped, and then interpreted the main ideas.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Quantitative Analysis

It consisted of 212 students of the Hospitality and Tourism career from a private university in Lima city. The survey results present quantitative data that are displayed in tables and figures. Figure 2 shows the sex of the 212 students surveyed, where 168 correspond to the female sex (79%) and 44 to the male sex (21%), so in the Hospitality and Tourism career, the female sex is predominant. Figure 3 shows the study semester of the 212 students surveyed. It can be seen that students in the eighth and ninth semesters are more predominant in answering the surveys. To answer question 2: What is the career perception of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the following indicators?

#### About the Availability of Career Opportunities

Figure 4 shows that, before the pandemic, the career perception of students is "agree" because tourism generates employment, while during the pandemic, the predominance is "neither agree nor disagree." This is reflected in the unemployment caused by the pandemic situation caused by COVID-19.

#### About the Work Environment

Figure 5 shows that before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the career perception of students regarding the work environment is "agree." Despite the pandemic, students consider that, in tourism, there should be a good work environment, and they also think that they are competent and work professionally.

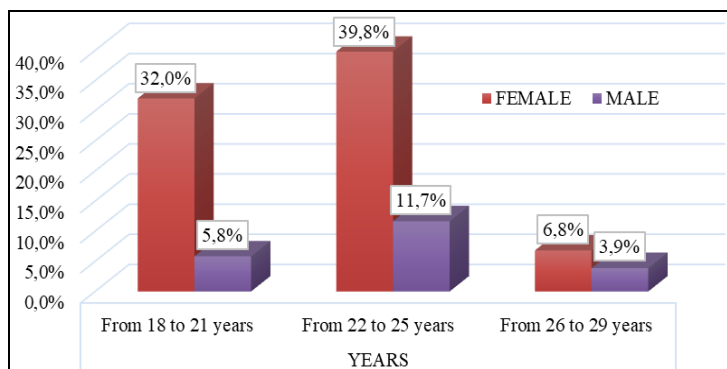


Figure 2. Sex of students

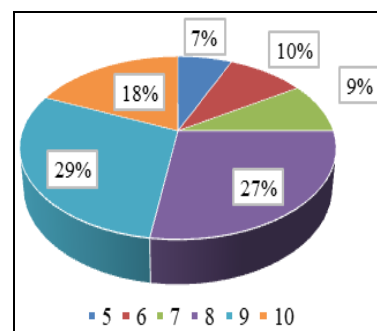


Figure 3. Study period

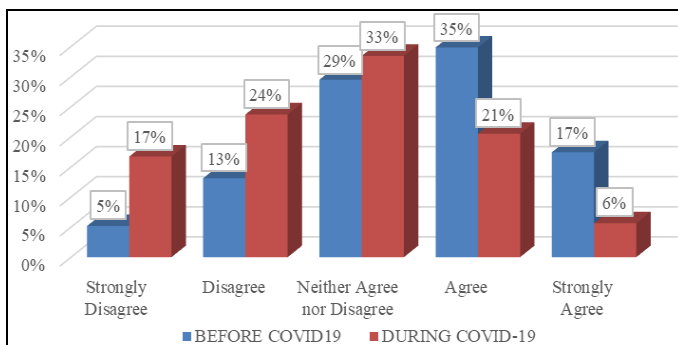


Figure 4. Availability of Career Opportunities

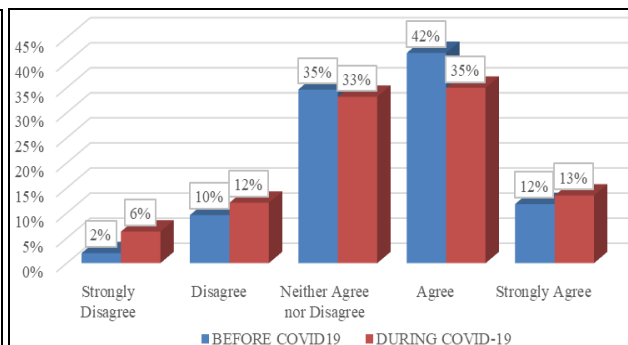


Figure 5. Work Environment

**About Salaries and Benefits**

Figure 6 shows that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the career perception of students was "agree," while during the pandemic, the predominance was "neither agree nor disagree," which can be attributed to the unemployment situation and economic instability during COVID-19.

**About the Skills and Competencies**

Figure 7 shows that before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominance was "agree." Students consider it important to have the skills and competencies needed in the tourism industry, which makes them adaptable in their chosen field.

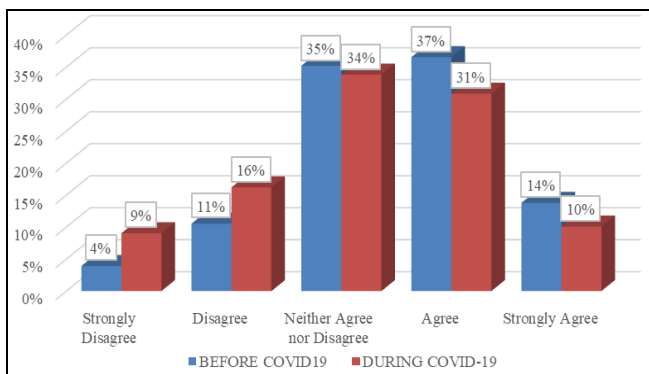


Figure 6. Salaries and Benefits

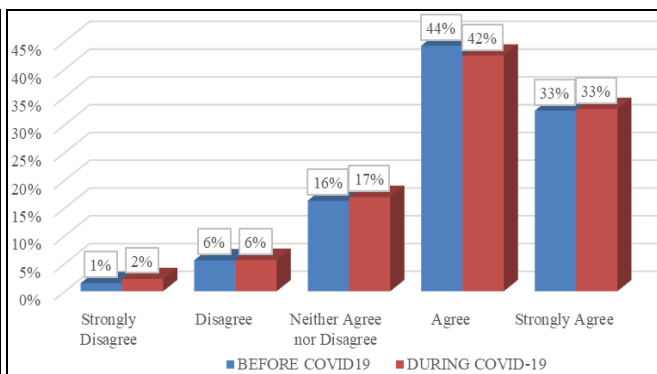


Figure 7. Skills and Competencies

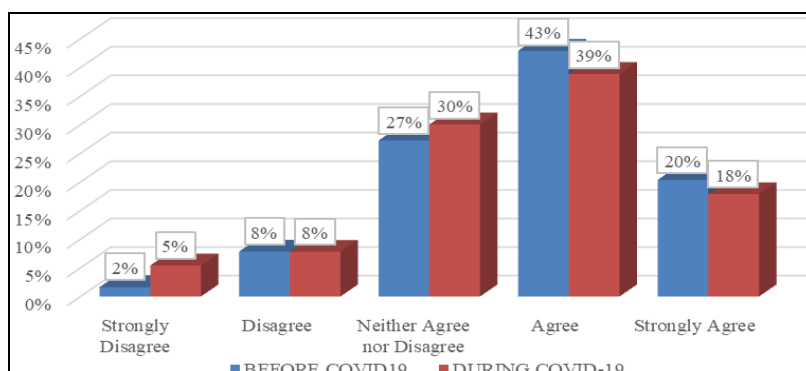


Figure 8. Professional Growth and Personal Development

**About Professional Growth and Personal Development**

Figure 8 shows that before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominance was "agree." Students believe that the tourism industry helps their personal growth and development.

As shown in Table 1, the Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the career perception of Hospitality and Tourism students and to answer question 3: Is there a significant difference in the career perception of students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? It was found that there are changes in the career perceptions of Hospitality and Tourism students, and there is a significant difference between the two periods (before and during). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, as **H0** means that there is no significant difference in the career perception of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic because  $P > =0.05$ , and **H1** means that there is a significant difference in the career perception of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic because  $P < 0.05$ .

Table 1. Significant difference in the career perception of students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

		Mean	sd	z	p	Sig.
Availability of career opportunitie	Before	3.43	1.07	-7.531	.000	s
	During	2.69	1.13			
Work environment	Before	3.49	0.89	-2.170	.030	s
	During	3.34	1.06			
Salaries and benefits	Before	3.44	0.96	-4.864	.000	s
	During	3.15	1.08			
Skills and competencies	Before	3.98	0.92	-.057	.955	ns
	During	3.96	0.96			
Personal growth and development	Before	3.71	0.92	-1.946	.052	ns
	During	3.55	1.04			
Career perception	Before	<b>3.33</b>	<b>0.68</b>	<b>-5.242</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>s</b>
	During	<b>3.6</b>	<b>0.64</b>			

Note: The Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney test for nonparametric related samples is applied

Table 2. Recollection of career perceptions of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Indicators	Before Covid-19			During Covid 19		
	mean	sd	iv	mean	sd	iv
There are many opportunities in the airline industry.	3.42	1.03	na,nd	2.71	1.11	na,nd
There are great opportunities in the cruise industry.	3.34	1.12	na,nd	2.67	1.11	na,nd
There are many opportunities with travel agencies.	3.7	1.05	a	2.8	1.15	na,nd
There are many opportunities in the event industry.	3.67	1.14	a	2.83	1.22	na,nd
There are greater opportunities in the government sector.	3.18	0.99	na,nd	2.74	1.05	na,nd
<b>Availability of career opportunities</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>1.07</b>	<b>na,nd</b>	<b>2.69</b>	<b>1.13</b>	<b>na,nd</b>
In the tourism sector, employee welfare is a primary concern of management.	3.47	0.96	na,nd	3.49	1.11	na,nd
Policies, including those related to employee welfare, are clearly understood and well implemented.	3.36	0.88	na,nd	3.3	1.05	na,nd
All employees are competent and work professionally.	3.68	0.92	a	3.42	1.02	na,nd
The physical environment is safe and healthy for workers.	3.55	0.81	a	3.34	1.1	na,nd
There is a harmonious working relationship between management and employees, on the one hand, and among all employees, on the other.	3.54	0.88	a	3.32	1.01	na,nd
<b>Work environment</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>0.89</b>	<b>na,nd</b>	<b>3.34</b>	<b>1.06</b>	<b>na,nd</b>
The tourism sector offers a higher salary package compared to other industries.	3.02	1.01	na,nd	2.74	1.02	na,nd
There are additional monetary benefits besides the base salary, such as allowances, bonuses, etc.	3.64	0.86	a	3.26	1.1	na,nd
There are also non-monetary benefits in addition to those provided by law, such as transportation service, health insurance, free travel, etc.	3.52	0.97	a	3.26	1.08	na,nd
The tourism sector can improve the quality of life of its workers due to higher salaries and many benefits.	3.63	1	a	3.3	1.11	na,nd
The tourism sector has many good benefits that other industries do not have.	3.48	0.95	na,nd	3.28	1.09	na,nd
<b>Salaries and benefits</b>	<b>3.44</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>na,nd</b>	<b>3.15</b>	<b>1.08</b>	<b>na,nd</b>
I believe I have the necessary skills that would match the demands of the tourism sector.	3.92	0.86	a	3.87	0.91	a
I can use my skills and abilities to work effectively in the tourism sector.	4.04	0.94	a	3.97	0.96	a
My personal values and character traits are appropriate for the tourism sector.	4.07	0.92	a	4.13	0.96	a
I know I have an advantage in the tourism sector with my skills and competencies.	3.94	0.95	a	3.99	0.95	a
I know that the tourism sector will provide opportunities to enhance my skills and competencies further.	4.06	0.91	a	3.94	1.01	a
<b>Skills and competencies</b>	<b>3.98</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>3.96</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>a</b>
The tourism sector offers various training programs for the professional growth of its workers.	3.7	0.94	a	3.54	1.07	a
The tourism sector provides more opportunities for career advancement.	3.69	0.87	a	3.46	1	na,nd
There is a career path strictly followed by the tourism sector.	3.54	0.92	a	3.46	1.03	na,nd
The tourism sector helps to develop the confidence to gain experience in the chosen field.	3.83	0.97	a	3.64	1.03	a
The tourism sector helps the professional and personal development of its workers.	3.87	0.91	a	3.7	1.07	a
<b>Personal growth and development</b>	<b>3.71</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>3.55</b>	<b>1.04</b>	<b>a</b>

Note: Standard deviation (sd), agree (a), neither agree nor disagree (na, nd). Table 2 shows a numerical summary of the overall average of the career perceptions of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the five indicators, respectively

**Qualitative Analysis**

Five university students aged between 19 and 26 years old were interviewed for the qualitative study. The study used

the interview as an instrument to collect information regarding the students' expectations of a career in hospitality and tourism. For this purpose, three general questions were proposed, which covered 6 specific questions each. The triangulation method was used to decode the interviews by contrasting them with the quantitative analysis and previous studies (background). In terms of the student's perception of the situation of the tourism industry during the pandemic, it is highlighted that the closure of tourism businesses during the pandemic and the limitation of tourist trips also made it impossible for them to develop fieldwork courses, moving only to virtual class monitoring, and making the activities of courses that require guided tours impossible due to capacity issues and biosafety standards. Only one student mentioned that he did not feel affected because he stopped studying due to isolation issues. On the other hand, students mentioned that, due to the increase in unemployment and massive layoffs, they couldn't get jobs in their field, and it did not even allow them to get professional internships in the area. This uncertainty about the future of the industry and the lack of effective strategies by teachers to adapt to the current situation generate anxiety and concern in the students about their professional future in the area of administration and tourism and its economic reactivation.

## DISCUSSION

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, students are evaluated, specifically in the tourism and hospitality industry, as they witness the experience of this virus. As a consequence, this situation causes a loss of confidence and anxiety in a large number of students. Regarding the indicator "Career Opportunities" in the tourism industry, students before the pandemic "strongly agreed." It is inferred that they consider that the tourism sector provides them with opportunities to work in different areas of the tourism industry (airlines, cruises, travel agencies, event industry, etc.), which is corroborated by Anandhwanlert and Wattanasan (2016), who point out that tourism is a relevant economic industry that grows rapidly, and is a great generator of employment because it produces new job opportunities; it occupies an important place in the economy of countries because it contributes to the improvement of social development to minimize poverty and promotes peace.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most students were "neither agree nor disagree." This means that their career perceptions regarding this indicator are uncertain due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to feelings of insecurity and may be very shocking for many of the students because the tourism sector was paralyzed. They agree with the study by Rahman et al. (2021), pointing out that the pandemic caused governments to apply measures to ensure their nation's security through blockades and restrictions to prevent the spread of epidemics or infections. However, such excessively strict measures hurt the tourism industry, affecting the development of the economy and reducing the employment rate.

In the Work Environment indicator, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, students "agreed." This is reinforced by the research by Benaraba et al. (2021), indicating that a good work environment is a major motivator for employees to perform better and enjoy their professional careers. The indicator "Salaries and Benefits" before the COVID-19 pandemic is reflected as "agree," coinciding with the research by Fuletti (2012) and Njoroge et al. (2015), who state that good remuneration, benefits, and work environment are the main motivations for getting a job; while during the pandemic their opinion was "neither agree, nor disagree," coinciding with Aristovnick et al. (2020) and Akkermans et al. (2020). Students experienced boredom, frustration, and the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in job insecurity, emotional impact, loss of income, and increased anxiety. The Skills and Competencies indicator, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, is reflected as "agree," coinciding with the research by Bordean and Sonea (2018) since the student demonstrates an awareness of the skills and competencies required of a tourism industry collaborator. The result agrees with Benaraba et al. (2021), Nyamwange (2016), and Aristovnick et al. (2020), as the study demonstrates confidence on the part of the students about their skills and competencies. It is also highlighted that it is required to know their interests to strengthen their skills.

The Professional Growth and Personal Development indicator, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, is manifested as "agree," coinciding with Masdonati et al. (2017), who affirms that there must be personal development to prevail in the tourism career. Likewise, the result of the indicator also agrees with Cortés et al. (2017), Nyamwange (2016), and Novack et al. (1999) since professional growth is encouraged, which is very important to work together with their study institutions. It should be noted that the results of the qualitative analysis are related to the descriptive analysis of both frequencies and percentages concerning the career perception of students regarding the situation of the tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviewees agreed that the pandemic had hurt the promotion of the tourism industry, which coincides with the research by Akkermans et al. (2020) and Benaraba et al. (2021), who point out that the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in social isolation and restrictions that were carried out to prevent the spread of the disease in the world. In this way, governments took measures to counteract or block the pandemic by temporarily halting national and international flights, closing restaurants and entertainment venues, and canceling congresses, festivals, and fairs, among other restrictions, to reduce the spread of the disease. The pandemic affected millions who lost jobs, and unemployment rates rose dramatically. The results on the subject of career opportunities in tourism during the pandemic show credibility on the part of students that there are different areas in which they can develop or create their own business and also that there are not so many career opportunities in the tourism industry and public sector. This coincides with Sheng (2020), who mentions that the COVID-19 virus resulted in a decrease in career opportunities for future students in the tourism and hospitality industry. Njoroge et al. (2015) and Zikic and Richarson (2007) point out that external and internal influences determine students' decision to undertake or remain in the search for a career opportunity. It also agrees with the studies by Benaraba et al. (2021), Ryan and Deci (2000), Agarwala (2008), and Wüst and Leko Simić (2017), as they mention that remuneration influences the student and employee the most.

Akkermans et al. (2020) also noted that, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, negative consequences include job insecurity, emotional impact due to social distancing, loss of income, and increased anxiety.



## CONCLUSION

Finally, the general objective of the research was to determine and compare the career perceptions of Hospitality and Tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Northern Lima, 2022. In the first specific objective, the situation of the tourism industry was revealed, where it was concluded that students were undoubtedly affected by the closure of tourism businesses, travel restrictions, increased unemployment, and anxiety about their future careers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second specific objective, the career perceptions of students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic were determined in terms of the following indicators: Availability of career opportunities (before the COVID-19 pandemic, from the career perception of students, 35% "agreed," while during the pandemic, the predominance was 33% for "neither agree nor disagree"); work environment (before the pandemic COVID -19, from the career perception of students, 42% "agreed," while during the pandemic, the predominance was 35% "agree;" salaries and benefits (before the COVID-19 pandemic, the career perception of students was 37% "agree," while during the pandemic, the predominance was 34% "neither agree nor disagree;" skills and competencies (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominance was "agree," with 44% and 42%, respectively); professional growth and personal development (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominance was "agree," with 43% and 39%, respectively).

The third specific objective revealed a significant difference in students' career perceptions before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, so the null hypothesis was rejected. The fourth specific objective unveiled students' perceptions of their career opportunities in the tourism industry during this pandemic as full of uncertainties and indecision. Other interviewees observed an optimistic view. They considered alternative plans, such as a technical course or degree, establishing their own business, continuing their studies, and other opportunities unrelated to the tourism industry.

The fifth specific objective was to learn about the students' proposals to help them pursue their careers in the tourism industry. The students' proposals are considered very important to provide possible adequate solutions for their careers in the face of this pandemic situation. Among them are: the university should implement more job sites focused on the tourism industry to find more job opportunities in that sector; the labor market should be expanded for students of the hospitality and tourism career in both the public and private sectors; lectures, seminars, webinars, counseling or personal counseling on the tourism career perception due to the COVID-19 pandemic should be conducted. The university must expand its partnerships with national and international organizations and improve online learning tools.

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