

The professional career of tourism students in times of pandemic: Analysis from social psychology and relational marketing

La carrera profesional de los estudiantes de turismo en tiempos de pandemia: análisis desde la psicología social y el marketing relacional

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Recepción: 13 de mayo de 2024

Aprobación: 19 de marzo de 2025



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to determine the extent to which students' satisfaction with their university influences their trust and expectations regarding a future career in tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employs a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional design. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to a sample of 275 students at Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid, Spain). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using *path analysis*. Overall, the results support most of the proposed hypotheses. *Satisfaction* emerges as the variable exerting the strongest influence on trust and, to a lesser extent, on students' expectations regarding their future during the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS: student satisfaction, trust, affective commitment, purpose in life, tourism career expectations, COVID-19.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es determinar en qué medida la satisfacción de los estudiantes con su universidad influye en su confianza y expectativas respecto a una futura carrera en turismo durante la pandemia de COVID-19. El estudio emplea un diseño cuantitativo, no experimental y transversal. Los datos se recopilieron mediante un cuestionario administrado a una muestra de 275 estudiantes de la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid, España). Se realizó un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales (SEM) mediante un análisis Path. En general, los resultados respaldan la mayoría de las hipótesis propuestas. La *satisfacción* emerge como la variable que ejerce la mayor influencia en la confianza y, en menor medida, en las expectativas de los estudiantes respecto a su futuro durante la pandemia de COVID-19.

PALABRAS CLAVE: satisfacción estudiantil, confianza, compromiso afectivo, propósito en la vida, expectativas profesionales en turismo, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented crisis in many sectors, and tourism was among the most severely affected. This crisis in the tourism sector was compounded by the structural deficits traditionally associated with its intrinsic characteristics (Tuzunkan, 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that students in degrees related to the internationally known discipline of Hospitality and Tourism may have perceived a greater threat to their future professional careers.

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A primary step in studying personal perceptions of future threats to different services is the analysis of satisfaction. Howard and Sheth (1969) defined satisfaction as the degree of congruence between a person's aspirations and perceived experiences. Based on this definition, Rust and Oliver (1994) developed the Expectation-Disconfirmation Model. This model posits that individuals purchase goods or services with certain prior expectations regarding their anticipated outcomes (Albtoosh & Ngah, 2022). These expectations subsequently serve as a benchmark against which the performance of the good or service is evaluated. Such an evaluation can generate three possible outcomes (Oliver, 1980). If performance matches expectations, congruence occurs, known as confirmation. If performance exceeds expectations, positive disconfirmation occurs. Finally, if performance falls below expectations, negative disconfirmation occurs. The Expectation-Disconfirmation Model discussed in this paragraph has been validated for decades in relation to the consumption of goods and services (Liu *et al.*, 2020), in public school contexts (Hjortskov, 2019), and even in studies examining university students' expectations of their higher education institutions (Alves & Raposo, 2009).

On the other hand, another key conceptual framework in this study is Relationship Marketing. Relationship Marketing is the result of changes in the environment. In a competitive scenario, where individuals (i.e., students) have many options and quality product and/or service is no longer sufficient, gaining customer loyalty has become increasingly challenging for companies. To address this, organizations—specifically higher education institutions—propose marketing actions aimed at their students to foster favorable perceptions of the institution (Casanoves-Boix *et al.*, 2017). In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize—and Relationship Marketing accounts for this—that students' perceptions can pertain to both tangible or intangible services (Nadiri *et al.*, 2009).

Furthermore, Purpose in Life (PIL) has been defined as a life attitude (Reker *et al.*, 1987) and conceptualized as a more general activity of finding meaning (Frankl, 1993). Based on Frankl's logotherapy, individuals find meaning in three primary ways. First, individuals can find meaning by creating a product (broadly defined) or doing something of personal significance. In addition, the meaning could also be derived from their engagement in work, school, or other daily activities. Individuals may also find meaning by experiencing or encountering something or someone (e.g., through their social relationships). The third approach for finding meaning addresses how individuals find meaning in suffering. The scope of this article encompasses the first way: how students find meaning by doing something of personal significance while engaged at university.

The last concept integrated into this study is expectancy. In Social Psychology, expectancy has frequently been identified as an antecedent of individual behavior (Bandura, 1977; Collado & Evans, 2019). From a marketing perspective, an expectation is viewed as the judgement a person or collective thinks will or should happen under a given set of circumstances (Collado & Evans, 2019). Within the field of higher education, expectations regarding Tourism have been analyzed for a decade or more, coinciding with the specialization of such studies (Richardson, 2010). In the case of the Tourism students, and following Bandura's (1977) definition, outcome expectancy could be considered the belief that engaging in a behaviour (such as studying a four-year Tourism degree) will lead to a concrete result, such as finding a job once the studies are completed.

Therefore, this study is grounded in the intersection of Relationship Marketing (Casanoves-Boix *et al.*, 2017) and Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory (Albtoosh & Ngah, 2022). The objective of this research is to examine the extent to which students' satisfaction with their university influences their trust and expectations regarding a future tourism career during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is justified by the need to understand how satisfaction at Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid, Spain) shapes students' trust and expectations concerning a future tourism career during unstable periods, such as the COVID-19 crisis.

Based on the problem statement, this study addresses the following research questions: To what extent does students' satisfaction with their university influence trust and expectations regarding a future tourism career during the COVID-19 pandemic? How does trust shape the affective commitment students develop toward their university through their tourism studies? Finally, to what extent does purpose in life, alongside trust and affective commitment, determine expectations for a future tourism career?

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The introduction outlines the research problem, justification, objectives, and research questions. The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses. The methodology section then describes the sample, data collection procedures, and measurement instruments. This is followed by an assessment of the measurement model, including tests of unidimensionality, reliability, and validity, and an evaluation of the structural model. Finally, the empirical findings are presented and discussed, highlighting hypothesis testing results, theoretical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

1. 1. Satisfaction as a determinant of trust

Prior research has shown that student satisfaction and related aspects, such as hedonic and economic benefits, influence trust (Akrouf & Nagy, 2018; Medina & Rufin, 2015). Furthermore, satisfaction has been found to directly affect trust in public universities (Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, trust positively influences perceived value and loyalty toward the university (Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014). These empirical findings support the following hypothesis:

H1: Student satisfaction with their university studies has a direct and positive influence on trust.

1. 2. Satisfaction and expectations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

Some studies have identified a relationship between satisfaction and future expectations. Specifically, Hjortskov (2019) found that parents' satisfaction with their children's public schools influenced their future expectations, although this effect was modest. Similarly, in the educational context, positive emotions such as satisfaction appear to be antecedents of outcome expectations among higher education students (Lent *et al.*, 1994). However, this relationship may also operate in the opposite direction. For instance, high initial expectations regarding public services can lead to lower levels of subsequent satisfaction (Hjortskov, 2019). Based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Student satisfaction with university studies has a direct and positive influence on future expectations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. 3. Purpose in life as a determinant of expectations amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Purpose in life and future expectations are closely related, particularly from an existential perspective. Indeed, when individuals perceive that they have less time to live (i.e., reduced life expectancy), positive affect becomes increasingly associated with the experience of meaning in life (Hicks *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, early studies found that purpose in life is positively associated with future expectations (Reker & Cousins, 1979). For example, external locus of control (the belief that the causes of one's failures and successes are external) is a construct closely related to expectations and has been found to be inversely related to purpose in life (Phillips, 1980).

Consequently, higher levels of external attributions are associated with lower levels of purpose in life. Research on purpose in life has also focused on college students and undergraduates (Molasso, 2006; Robinson & Glanzer, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2016). This population is particularly relevant given the transition from high school to university. Specifically, Robinson & Glanzer (2016) identified the types of expectations university students hold regarding how their time at the institution may influence their personal development. Their

findings suggest that holistic expectations are strongly associated with higher levels of purpose in life. Considering these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Students' purpose in life, developed through their university studies, has a direct and positive influence on their future expectations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. 4. Trust as a determinant of affective commitment

The academic literature has consistently demonstrated a clear relationship between trust and commitment since the seminal model proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), in which trust is identified as a primary antecedent of affective commitment (Bansal *et al.*, 2004). This relationship has been observed both in the context of tangible products and services (Fullerton, 2011) and within online communities (Akroun & Nagy, 2018). Furthermore, self-confidence has been found to mediate the relationship between institutional trust and affective commitment (Guh *et al.*, 2013).

Trust has a significant influence on affective commitment, as evidenced by studies involving university students (Erciş *et al.*, 2012). This relationship appears robust, as research findings suggest that this influence can be generalized across different types of trust measures (i.e., measures of positive expectations, disposition to vulnerability, and direct measures) and different trust referents (e.g., leaders and co-workers) (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007). Based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Students' trust in their university studies has a direct and positive influence on the affective commitment developed toward their university amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. 5. Trust as a determinant of university students' expectations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

Trust in certain institutions, such as government (Lovari, 2020) and health services (Jain *et al.*, 2020), has been eroded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, socioeconomic crises have been shown to negatively affect citizens' expectations, leading to a significant decline (Coupe, 2017).

Given that trust and expectations may decline during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is relevant to examine whether a relationship exists between them. Specifically, the proposed hypothesis seeks to test whether trust in the university influences students' expectations of securing employment after the pandemic. In other fields, such as tourism, a positive relationship between trust in social media content and destination expectations has been demonstrated (Narangajavana *et al.*, 2017); similar patterns have also been observed in the context of occupational risks (Burt *et al.*, 2012). Although research on educational expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic remains limited, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Students' trust in their university studies has a direct and positive influence on their socio-professional expectations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. 6. Affective commitment as a determinant of university students' expectations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

Affective commitment has been found to be inversely related to future intentions to switch companies in service settings (Bansal *et al.*, 2004), as well as to subsequent recommendations of the service brand (Fullerton, 2011). Therefore, future-oriented constructs such as expectations are likely to be linked to this subcomponent of commitment in the higher education sector. Based on evidence from other fields, the following final hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Students' affective commitment toward their university studies has a direct and positive influence on their expectations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. METHODOLOGY

2. 1. Measurement of variables and questionnaire

An exploratory, quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional study was conducted using a survey-based approach (Salkind, 1999). The scales employed to develop the data collection instrument were adapted from established measures in the existing literature. Consequently, the online questionnaire designed for this study consisted of three main sections:

The first section consisted of informed consent. Subsequently, Part II comprised five scales, each including between four and seven items. The scales included satisfaction (6 items), trust (7 items), affective commitment (4 items), purpose in life (5 items), and expectations of a future tourism career in the context of COVID-19 (4 items) (table 3). The items used to measure the study variables were assessed using 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In total, Part II comprised 26 items. Finally, Part III collected respondents' sociodemographic information and consisted of 12 questions of various formats (multiple choice, open-ended, Likert-type, etc.).

2. 2. Definition of the population and sample

Regarding the sampling strategy, a finite population sampling approach was employed to conduct the fieldwork (Chan-Golston *et al.*, 2020). This method allows for adequate representation of individuals with diverse characteristics within the target population. It was used to examine the extent to which Tourism students' career expectations are influenced by relationship marketing variables, such as trust and affective commitment, as well as by attitudinal constructs, including satisfaction and purpose in life (Hashim *et al.*, 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oliver, 1980; Sandoval-Barrientos *et al.*, 2017).

Specifically, a sample of students was selected to collect the data. The sample included students with diverse sociodemographic characteristics within a similar academic context. Consequently, the online questionnaire was distributed, in coordination with the Tourism Degree coordinators, to Tourism students at Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid, Spain). A total of 340 questionnaires were collected, of which 275 were deemed valid. The response rate was 81% (275/340), which is considered acceptable according to previous studies (Boubker *et al.*, 2021: $n = 98$ students; Iwu *et al.*, 2019: $n = 126$ students). Table 1 presents the technical specifications of the study. The characteristics of the sample are presented in table 2.

TABLE 1
Technical specifications of the study

Characteristics	Description
Geographic area	Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, Spain.
Population size	Students enrolled in the Tourism degree program
Sample size	275 valid responses obtained from 340 distributed online questionnaires (response rate = 81%)
Sampling error	5.9% (most conservative scenario; 95% confidence level; $p = q = 0.5$)
Sampling method	Online questionnaire
Data collection period	November-December 2020

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

TABLE 2
Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Gender		Frequency (%)		Age		Frequency (%)	
Men	39	14.2%	Under 20	65	23.6%		
Women	236	85.8%	21-30	207	75.3%		
			31-40	1	0.4%		
			41-50	1	0.4%		
			51-60	1	0.4%		
			Over 61	0	0.0%		
Household Structure		Frequency (%)		Parent/Guardian Occupation		Frequency (%)	
Single-person household	99	36.0%	Employee	122	44.4%		
Couple without Children	16	5.8%	Entrepreneur	28	10.2%		
Couple with one child	21	7.6%	Self-employed	38	13.8%		
Couple with two or more children	108	39.4%	Retired	10	3.6%		
Divorced	21	7.6%	Public sector employee	60	21.8%		
Separated	10	3.6%	Unemployed	17	6.2%		
Income level		Frequency (%)					
	Less than € 900		11		4.0%		
	€ 901-€ 1 200		69		25.1%		
	€ 1 201-€ 1 500 €		47		17.1%		
	€ 1 501-€ 2 000		48		17.5%		
	€ 2 001-€ 3 000		51		18.5%		
	€ 3 001-€ 4 000		29		10.5%		
	More than €4 001		20		7.3%		

Source: own elaboration.

3. RESULTS OF THE EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS

In this section, the results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) are presented. An EFA was conducted to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement scales. The scales were refined and simplified until the final measurement models were established using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 24). To improve the measurement scales, items V19 and V21 were eliminated due to factor loadings below 0.50 (table 3). This procedure allowed for the assessment of the reliability and validity of each construct (Warren *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted to examine the adequacy of the variables and to detect potential anomalies in the data; no irregularities were identified. The initial scales were subsequently refined through Exploratory Factor Analysis using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation, following the recommendations of Brown *et al.* (2008). Factor extraction was based on eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Furthermore, items were retained only if they exhibited factor loadings above 0.50, and each extracted factor accounted for a meaningful proportion of the total variance. Overall, the EFA confirmed the existence of the proposed factors and supported the unidimensionality of the constructs.

Subsequently, Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha > 0.70$) was calculated to assess the internal consistency reliability of the scales. All coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability (Warren *et al.*, 2020).

In addition, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was computed. KMO values range between 0 and 1, with values closer to 1 indicating greater suitability of the data for factor analysis. Conversely, values below 0.50 suggest inadequate sampling adequacy (Chi, 2012). Finally, the factor loadings, percentage of explained variance, cumulative variance, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and KMO values are presented in table 3.

TABLE 3
Exploratory factor analysis

Variables/Items/Author	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	KMO
Satisfaction: Oliver (1980)			
% Variance: 67.211		0.898	0.885
Cumulative variance (%): 67.211			
(V1) It was wise to choose this university to pursue my professional studies	0.845		
(V2) My experience at this university is satisfactory	0.859		
(V3) Overall, I am satisfied with studying at this university	0.916		
(V4) This university handles administrative procedures efficiently (enrollment and validation processes)	0.566		
(V5) This university is one of the best of its kind	0.814		
(V6) This university meets my expectations	0.872		
Trust: Morgan & Hunt (1994); Bart et al. (2005)			
% Variance: 72.215		0.936	0.933
Cumulative variance (%): 72.215			
(V7) This university provides good service	0.784		
(V8) This university generally keeps its promises	0.848		
(V9) This university puts students' interests first	0.871		
(V10) I trust my university	0.902		
(V11) This university is safe and trustworthy	0.858		
(V12) This university behaves honestly toward me	0.851		
(V13) This university considers the consequences of its actions for students	0.829		
Affective commitment: Delgado & Munuera (2001); Garbarino & Johnson (1999); Matos-Cámara (2019)			
% Variance: 76.499		0.897	0.838
Cumulative variance (%): 76.499			
(V14) I have a strong sense of loyalty to this university	0.885		
(V15) I have feelings of affection for this university	0.880		
(V16) I feel a strong sense of belonging to this university	0.895		
(V17) I defend this university if someone criticizes it	0.835		
Expectations: Veliz-Burgos (2012); Wang et al. (2016)			
% Variance: 83.106		0.796	0.500
Cumulative variance (%): 83.106			
(V18) Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe my future job prospects will be positive	0.912		
(V19) I believe that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic I will continue to educate myself		Item eliminated	
(V20) Since the COVID-19 pandemic my economic expectations are positive	0.912		
(V21) Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I expect my future life to be more difficult		Item eliminated	
Life purpose: Sandoval-Barrientos et al. (2017)			
% Variance: 57.876		0.818	0.791
Cumulative variance (%): 57.876			
(V22) I enjoy making plans and working to make them come true	0.745		
(V23) I am proactive in carrying out the projects I set for myself	0.768		
(V24) I feel good when I think about what I have done in the past and what I hope to do in the future	0.794		
(V25) My goals in life have been more a source of satisfaction than frustration for me	0.773		
(V26) I am clear about the direction and goal of my life	0.723		

Source: own elaboration

3.1. Confirmatory factor analysis

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model using LISREL 8.87. In addition, a path analysis was performed to examine the structural relationships among the latent variables. This procedure allowed for the evaluation of the overall model fit and the strength of the hypothesized relationships. Validity assessment extends beyond reliability, as it examines the extent to which the constructs accurately measure the theoretical concepts under investigation (Warren *et al.*, 2020).

In the second stage of the confirmatory analysis, item elimination was based on the standardized factor loadings ($\lambda \geq 0.50$) and the associated *t*-values, which were required to exceed the critical value of 1.96 to ensure statistical significance. Additionally, the squared multiple correlations (R^2) were examined to assess the explanatory power of each indicator. Model re-specification was guided by several goodness-of-fit indices: (1) the chi-square statistic (χ^2); (2) the root mean square residual (RMR); (3) the normed fit index (NFI); (4) the comparative fit index (CFI); (5) the incremental fit index (IFI); (6) the relative fit index (RFI); and (7) the goodness-of-fit index (GFI). Following the recommendations of Brown *et al.* (2008), multiple fit indices were considered to compensate for the limitations of any single measure. A satisfactory model fit is indicated when NFI, CFI, and IFI values exceed 0.90 and approach 1.00. For the RMR, values below 0.09 indicate acceptable fit (Hair *et al.*, 2009). These indices collectively provide a comprehensive assessment of model adequacy (Warren *et al.*, 2020). The initial confirmatory factor analysis yielded the following results: $\chi^2 (3) = 46.326$ ($p < 0.001$); RMR = 0.0577; NFI = 0.925; CFI = 0.929; IFI = 0.930; GFI = 0.941. After model re-specification achieved by eliminating items V19 and V21 due to non-significant factor loadings below 0.50 (table 5) the revised model demonstrated improved fit indices: $\chi^2 (3) = 40.246$ ($p < 0.001$); RMR = 0.0450; NFI = 0.929; CFI = 0.932; IFI = 0.933; GFI = 0.948. These results indicate that the re-specified model achieved acceptable levels of goodness of fit according to the critical values recommended in the literature (Hair, 2011).

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are presented in table 5. Subsequently, the global structural model was estimated using path analysis, incorporating the variables retained after the refinement of each measurement scale. The correlation matrix of the latent variables indicates that, although the constructs are correlated, they remain sufficiently distinct, thereby supporting discriminant validity. To further assess discriminant validity, the confirmatory measurement model was evaluated by constraining the correlations between latent variables to 1.0 and comparing the model fit. The resulting correlation matrix values were within acceptable thresholds (see table 4), providing additional evidence of discriminant validity.

TABLE 4
Correlation matrix of latent variables

	SAT	TRU	AFFC	EXP	PUR
SAT	1				
TRU	0.816	1			
AFFC	0.686	0.644	1		
EXP	0.277	0.320	0.196	1	
PUR	0.176	0.183	0.143	0.222	1

Source: own elaboration.

The structural model was estimated using path analysis based on the validated measurement model. The explanatory power of the endogenous constructs was assessed through R^2 values, which exceeded the recommended minimum threshold of 0.10. Figure 1 displays the standardized path coefficients, depicting the structural relationships between independent and dependent constructs and indicating the empirical support for the proposed hypotheses.

TABLE 5
Confirmatory factor analysis

Variables/Items	λ	t -value	R ²	Error variance
Satisfaction				
(V1) It was wise to choose this university to pursue my professional studies	0.747	6.496	0.558	0.432
(V2) My experience at this university is satisfactory	0.714	7.398	0.548	0.452
(V3) Overall, I am satisfied with studying at this university	0.744	8.586	0.589	0.411
(V4) This university handles administrative procedures efficiently (enrollment and validation processes)	0.822	7.632	0.675	0.325
(V5) This university is one of the best of its kind	0.747	9.799	0.557	0.443
(V6) This university meets my expectations	0.811	11.040	0.656	0.344
Trust				
(V7) This university provides good service	0.822	7.632	0.675	0.325
(V8) This university generally keeps its promises	0.747	9.799	0.557	0.443
(V9) This university puts students' interests first	0.811	11.040	0.656	0.344
(V10) I trust my university	0.869	12.325	0.754	0.246
(V11) This university is safe and trustworthy	0.602	7.399	0.362	0.638
(V12) This university behaves honestly toward me	0.978	15.240	0.957	0.043
(V13) This university considers the consequences of its actions for students	0.982	15.343	0.964	0.036
Affective commitment				
(V14) I have a strong sense of loyalty to this university	0.723	9.385	0.523	0.477
(V15) I have feelings of affection for this university	0.822	7.632	0.675	0.325
(V16) I feel a strong sense of belonging to this university	0.747	9.799	0.558	0.443
(V17) I defend this university if someone criticizes it	0.811	11.040	0.656	0.344
Expectations				
(V18) Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe my future job prospects will be positive	0.869	12.325	0.754	0.246
(V19) I believe that amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I will continue my education		Item eliminated		
(V20) Since the COVID-19 pandemic my economic expectations are positive	0.982	15.343	0.964	0.036
(V21) Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I expect my future life to be more difficult.		Item eliminated		
Life purpose				
(V22) I enjoy making plans and working to make them come true.	0.835	10.445	0.698	0.302
(V23) I am proactive in carrying out the projects I set for myself	0.885	11.271	0.782	0.218
(V24) I feel good when I think about what I have done in the past and what I hope to do in the future	0.839	10.509	0.704	0.296
(V25) My goals in life have been more a source of satisfaction than frustration for me	0.822	10.224	0.675	0.325
(V26) I am clear about the direction and goal of my life	0.885	11.276	0.783	0.217

Source: own elaboration.

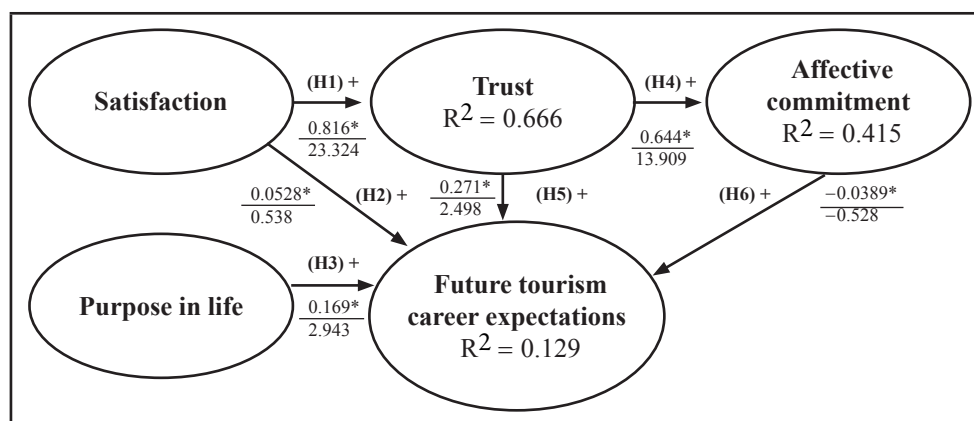


FIGURE 1

Results of the Structural Model

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Note: significance level * $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$.

3.2. Interpretation of results figure

After confirming that the model fit is adequate, the causal relationships proposed in the model are examined. Traditional notation is used, with statistically significant relationships indicated by asterisks corresponding to confidence levels above 95%. The results indicate that most of the proposed hypotheses are supported (H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5), whereas one hypothesis (H6) is not supported.

First, H1, which posits a positive relationship between satisfaction and students' trust in their university, is strongly supported. The level of satisfaction derived from students' academic experience in the Tourism degree program has a direct and positive effect on the trust they develop toward their university. This hypothesis exhibits the strongest effect within the proposed structural model ($\lambda = 0.816$, $t = 23.324$, $p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that satisfaction is the construct that contributes most significantly to the formation of trust in the individual, consistent with previous research (Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2020).

Subsequently, H2, which posits that satisfaction derived from university studies in tourism positively influences students' expectations regarding their future tourism career during the COVID-19 pandemic, is supported ($\lambda = 0.528$, $t = 3.538$, $p < 0.05$). This finding suggests a positive direct relationship between satisfaction and career expectations, consistent with previous research on university students (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006).

In turn, H3, which posits that students' purpose in life during the COVID-19 pandemic positively influences their expectations regarding a future tourism career, is supported ($\lambda = 0.169$, $t = 2.943$, $p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that a stronger sense of purpose is associated with more favorable career expectations in the tourism sector. Given the limited empirical research examining the relationship between these variables, this result represents a novel contribution. Previous studies have conceptually distinguished different forms of student thinking in relation to the type of expectations pursued (Robinson & Glanzer, 2016).

Additionally, H4, which posits that students' trust in their university positively influences their affective commitment to the institution, is strongly supported ($\lambda = 0.644$, $t = 13.909$, $p < 0.05$). This finding indicates that higher levels of trust are associated with stronger affective commitment among students. The relationship between trust and commitment has been widely established within the relationship marketing literature (Hashim *et al.*, 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Snijders *et al.*, 2020), as well as in studies on educational services marketing (Erciş *et al.*, 2012). The present results further reinforce this well-documented association.

Next, H5, which posits that students' trust in their university positively influences their expectations regarding a future tourism career during the COVID-19 pandemic, is supported ($\lambda = 0.271$, $t = 2.498$, $p < 0.05$). This result indicates that higher levels of trust are associated with more favorable career expectations in the tourism sector.

Contrary to the proposed prediction, H6 is not supported. Affective commitment toward the university does not significantly influence students' expectations regarding a future tourism career during the COVID-19 pandemic ($\lambda = -0.0389$, $t = -0.528$, $p > 0.05$). The path coefficient is negative and statistically non-significant, indicating the absence of a meaningful relationship between these constructs in the present model. Although prior research has identified associations between affective commitment and related constructs such as behavioral intentions (Bansal *et al.*, 2004), the current findings do not provide empirical support for this direct effect.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

In conclusion, this study aimed to examine the extent to which students' satisfaction with their university influences their trust and expectations regarding a future tourism career during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the effect of trust on perceived affective commitment. Additionally, the research sought to assess students' sense of life purpose during the pandemic and to analyze the roles of trust and affective commitment as antecedents of future tourism career expectations within this context.

It is worth noting that few studies have adopted a multidisciplinary framework such as the one proposed in this research within the field of educational marketing. This approach offers a novel contribution that enriches marketing scholarship in the educational sector.

On the one hand, students' satisfaction with their Tourism studies at Rey Juan Carlos University in Madrid was found to exert a strong positive effect on trust. On the other hand, satisfaction with university studies also strongly predicts students' expectations regarding a future tourism career during the COVID-19 pandemic; this relationship represents the strongest causal effect identified in the model. Furthermore, trust was confirmed as a key antecedent of affective commitment, consistent with the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Finally, students' purpose in life directly and positively influences their expectations of a future tourism career during the pandemic.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, it was not possible to access a sample of final-year students or graduates already working in the tourism sector. Examining the relationships among the study variables within these subgroups would constitute a valuable avenue for future research. Additionally, although online surveys (such as the questionnaire administered through Google Forms) were virtually the only feasible data collection method during the pandemic, they present certain limitations that must be considered (Díaz de Rada, 2012). Nevertheless, online surveys remain effective data collection tools in social research, as demonstrated in prior studies (Lehdonvirta *et al.*, 2020).

A further limitation lies in the fact that the study relied on data collected from a single university in Madrid. Future research should replicate the proposed model across multiple universities to increase sample heterogeneity and strengthen the external validity of the results.

PROSPECTIVE

This research found that students' satisfaction with their university experience strongly predicts their expectations regarding the future during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, trust emerged as a key antecedent of affective commitment, consistent with the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and this relationship was supported in the present study. These findings suggest that the commitment-trust framework may be fruitfully applied to other educational service contexts.

From a managerial perspective, universities should prioritize the development of trust among students to foster affective commitment and strengthen long-term loyalty toward the institution. Finally, future research could incorporate perceived institutional reputation as an additional variable to examine its influence on students' career expectations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the reviewers of *CIENCIA ergo-sum* for their valuable suggestions, which helped to improve this research. We also thank Rey Juan Carlos University (URJC) and its students for facilitating data collection. In addition, we sincerely acknowledge María Dolores Flecha Barrio and José Ramón Sarmiento Guede, faculty members responsible for the Tourism program at URJC, for their invaluable assistance in disseminating the survey among students.

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Cómo citar el artículo:

Matos-Cámara, R. F., & Lobato-Rincón, L. L. (2026). The professional career of tourism students in times of pandemic: Analysis from social psychology and relational marketing. *CIENCIA ergo-sum*, 33. <https://doi.org/10.30878/ces.v33n0a46>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30878/ces.v33n0a46>



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