Factors Influencing on the Choice of Accounting & Finance Students' Career Pathways: A Case Study of a Private University in Sri Lanka

D.D.G.R. Weerasinghe & A.P.D. De Zoysa
NSBM Green University, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT: This study investigates the factors that shape the career pathway choices of accounting and finance undergraduates, a question that has taken on renewed importance as artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes entry-level accounting work. Drawing on Social Cognitive Career Theory, the study examines how intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, third-party influence, and career exposure affect students' career path choices. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire from students enrolled in the accounting and finance degree program at a private university in Sri Lanka. By distributing an online questionnaire, data was collected from a sample of 201undergraduates and and analyzed using multiple regression analysis, following reliability, normality, and multicollinearity diagnostics. The results show that intrinsic motivation ($\beta = 0.457$, $p < 0.001$) and career exposure ($\beta = 0.265$, $p < 0.001$) are significant predictors of career path choice, together explaining 43.7% of the variance in the outcome ($R^2 = 0.437$), whereas third-party influence and extrinsic motivation are not statistically significant. These findings suggest that accounting students' career decisions are driven primarily by personal fulfilment and hands-on exposure to the profession rather than by external reward or social pressure, a pattern that carries added weight as AI redefines the day-to-day content of accounting roles. The study contributes to the literature by extending the SCCT framework with career exposure as an additional determinant and by re-examining established motivational factors within an emerging, technology-disrupted labor market. The findings offer accounting educators, career counselors, and professional accounting bodies in Sri Lanka and comparable contexts evidence-based guidance for designing curricula, mentorship programs, and recruitment strategies that align with what actually drives students' career decisions

Keywords: career path choice, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, career exposure, third-party influence, Social Cognitive Career Theory

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most important aspects of a person's life is choosing a career [1]. A person's profession can influence their personality, determine their social standing, and forecast their income. A person's long-term well-being, income, work style, and personality are all greatly impacted by individual's decision on their profession [2]. Not only the person's future but also the economic well-being of whole country can be greatly impacted by a single poor career choice. Such misfits in the workplace will lead to reduce the productivity and efficiency in the whole organization. Every person must eventually deal with the obstacle of the career choice problem [3]. Especially, students face a variety of challenges when choosing a career [4]. It wouldn't be incorrect to say that the choice of study programs is also greatly influenced by the choice of future employment since the individuals must have specialized educational background prior to

embarking on the practical life [5]. Therefore, students are more likely to run across this issue when choosing their study plans. The accounting profession plays a pivotal role in the economic development and financial integrity of nations. Understanding the factors that influence career choices is essential, as they can significantly shape students' preferences and readiness to enter various accounting fields.

This study focuses on students who are enrolled in accounting and finance degree programs. Nowadays, Artificial intelligence (AI) technology is disrupting the conventional role of the accounting profession and requiring rapid paradigm shifts, its widespread application in the modern world presents a substantial challenge for accounting students. These difficulties have led to a decline in the demand for accounting and finance jobs in the labor market. While CIMA only registered 5,527 new members in 2013, ACCA recorded 10,361 new member enrolments despite this declining demand. This implies that more students are pursuing professions in accounting and finance by enrolling in study programs linked to accounting. However, they may decide against pursuing a profession in accounting and finance.

Despite the urgent need to address these issues, there is a noticeable lack of research that thoroughly examines the factors determining accounting and finance students' career path choices, especially considering AI's revolutionary potential. Emerging evidence confirms that AI is already reshaping the career prospects of accounting students and the technical and digital skills that employers expect of them [6], yet this literature has not been connected to the established motivational and social determinants of career choice. The present study addresses this gap by re-examining intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, third-party influence, and career exposure specifically within this AI-disrupted context, rather than simply replicating earlier, pre-AI determinant models. Some studies claim that a variety of factors, including external and internal (or both) influences, significantly affect people's employment choices [7]. Personal interests, personality, and goals are examples of intrinsic motivations, whereas external incentives and employment market trends are examples of extrinsic motivations.

Third-party influence, such as that of friends, family, and teachers, is also required when making a professional decision. Career exposure is particularly important since internships and real-world experiences have a big impact on how students view various career paths [7]. Given this, the main goal of this research is to determine and examine the variables that affect the job choices made by accounting graduates.

Accordingly, research questions can be formulated as follows;

- What is the impact of intrinsic motivational factors on the career choice of accounting and finance students.
- What is the impact of extrinsic motivational factors on the career choice of accounting and finance students.
- What is the impact of the influence of third party on the career choice of accounting and finance students.
- What is the impact of career exposure on the career choice of accounting and finance students.

This research adopts frameworks called Social Cognitive Career Theory to study the student’s career choice. The SCCT is the process by which a person develops his or her job choices, vocational interests, and perseverance [8]. According to SCCT, a person's self-efficacy beliefs and job expectations have an impact on their professional choices and objectives. The study provides a thorough model of career decision-making among accounting and finance students by methodically integrating several factors, including social context, career exposure, extrinsic rewards (financial rewards and job opportunities) and intrinsic motivation (personal interests and values).

According to Jusoff [9], a career path is a lifelong journey that ought to be planned at the start of one's profession. However, according to Joseph et al., a career path is an occupation that a person holds for the whole of their life [14]. In place of advancement in terms of career, personal development, job status, and job satisfaction, “career path” can also refer to work experience [9], [10]. One could use the terms “career path” and “career choice” interchangeably. Based on the definitions provided, the term “career path” in this study refers to the choice of career an accounting student makes after graduating. A student of accounting may choose to pursue a profession in audit, taxation, management accounting, financial accounting, finance, etc. Accounting students often pursue careers in auditing and taxation [11].

Factors that contribute to intrinsic motivation: An activity or object that makes one feel good about themselves is considered intrinsic motivation [12]. He went on to say that a person has intrinsic drive when he does because it challenges or interests him. Conversely, other research described intrinsic drive as a sense of fulfilment that comes from pursuing and looking for an activity [13]. Personal interest and choice are the two elements that make up intrinsic motivation. An individual's personal characteristics may also have an impact on their work route [14]. Past studies have discovered that for accounting students, intrinsic motivation was a crucial component [15]. Results showed that students' career pathways can be positively impacted by intrinsic desire. Another prior research clarified that students' perceptions and sentiments about the accounting profession have a positive and substantial impact on their choice of career [16]. A career in accounting and finance can be intrinsically motivating for students who are confident in their ability to achieve good outcomes and who excel with numbers and figures. However, personality traits such as aptitude and attitude have been found to be important in determining the development of job interest [17].

Extrinsic motivational elements: According to [12], an individual may be inspired to carry out specific actions by external sources. Extrinsic motivation, according to [18], is a driving force that originates from outside of a person. He clarified that even if someone does not enjoy their profession, they may be doing it in order to get anticipated benefits. According to a study by [19], financial accounting could give them greater extrinsic motivation in the form of better advantages and higher compensation. In addition, other earlier research has shown a positive correlation between career route and extrinsic motivation [13], [19], [20]. According to these previous investigations, pay and employment possibilities are the most prominent extrinsic motivation elements that have been discovered to affect career pathways.

Social influence: Career choice can also be affected by a person or a group of people which includes family members, friends, career guidance teachers, and career counselors. According to a number of prior studies, one of the key elements influencing accounting students' job choices is the influence of third parties. These earlier research indicate that parents, subject teachers, family members, and friends all have an impact on students [22]–[24].

Career exposure: The term used in this study describes how youngsters are exposed to information about careers. Most accounting students are exposed to the workforce through professional accounting organizations highlighted that it's critical that students learn about the nature of accounting and the range of employment options available [25]. One can choose a career more wisely if they are exposed to more information about careers. According to earlier research, students' job choices have been impacted by the career exposure provided by professionals [25], [26]. Over half of the students had gained exposure of some kind while attending college [25]. Lecturers, professional accounting organizations' career keynote addresses, and counseling sessions were the sources of exposure.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 *Materials*

As shown in Figure 1, the following conceptual framework illustrates how the independent factors that were chosen affected the dependent variable.

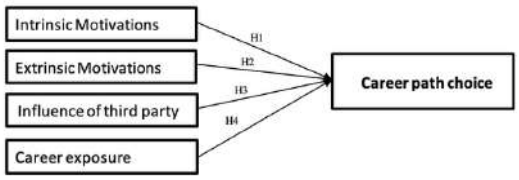

Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing the hypothesized relationships between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, third-party influence, career exposure, and career path choice

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and Career path choice
H2: There is a significant positive relationship between extrinsic motivation and Career path choice
H3: There is a significant positive relationship between influence of third party and Career path choice
H4: There is a significant positive relationship between career exposure and Career path choice

Measurement: This study operationalized five variables: career path choice, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, influence of third parties, and career exposure using multi-item scales adapted from prior literature, measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Career path choice, the dependent variable, was measured using five items adapted from [9]. Intrinsic motivation was assessed with five items adapted and extrinsic motivation was also measured using five items from [15]. Influence of third parties was captured through five items adapted from, [26]. Finally, career exposure was measured using four items adapted from [40]. All items were adapted to fit the context of accounting students and were reviewed for content validity prior to data collection.

Although intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, third-party influence, and career exposure are all recognized in the literature as antecedents of career choice, they are conceptually distinct constructs rather than restatements of one another. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are differentiated by their locus of causality: the former originates from internal satisfaction, interest, and self-efficacy, whereas the latter stems from external rewards such as pay and job security, and the two are treated as separate constructs in motivation theory [13]. Third-party influence and career exposure, in turn, capture social and experiential channels of influence rather than motivational states, operating through different mechanisms, guidance from significant others versus direct, first-hand exposure to the profession. Each construct was measured with its own validated multi-item scale adapted from prior studies, and the diagnostic tests reported in Section 3.2 confirm that the four variables are empirically distinct: all four recorded Tolerance values above 0.10 and VIF values below 10 (Table 3), indicating no problematic overlap among the predictors and supporting their retention as separate variables in the regression model.

2.2 *Methodology*

This study follows positivistic approach since several relationships are going to be quantified in a systematic manner assuming the objective reality about career choice decision. Study adopted deductive approach since the hypothesis are formulated based on an existing theory and the past literature. The target population in this study is all the students specializing in the field of accounting and finance in the selected private university, Sri Lanka. There are 5600 students attached to the faculty of business in that private university. The accounting and finance student population likely represents a significant portion, potentially 2,000 students across levels and 500 students in the 4th year. Sample size was determined using the Solvin formula, and accordingly the sample size determined was 222. Questionnaires were distributed online to all 222 students in the calculated sample who were pursuing the BM (Hons) in Accounting and Finance degree; of these, 201 valid responses were received and retained for analysis, representing a response rate of approximately 90.5%. The sampling method used in this study is convenience sampling. Participation was voluntary: respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and be used solely for academic purposes before giving their consent to complete the questionnaire, in line with standard ethical procedures for research involving human participants.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 *Reliability Analysis*

Table 1. Reliability analysis

Construct	Abbrev.	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Intrinsic Motivation	IM	6	.965
Extrinsic Motivation	EM	6	.946
Third-Party Influence	TPI	5	.824
Career Exposure	CE	5	.725
Career Path Choice	CPC	6	.916

Note. IM = Intrinsic Motivation; EM = Extrinsic Motivation; TPI = Third-Party Influence; CE = Career Exposure; CPC = Career Path Choice.

As shown in Table 1, by evaluating the internal consistency of these constructs through Cronbach's alpha, we can conclude that the items of each variable are closely related and effectively measure the intended concepts.

3.2 *Diagnostic Tests*

Table 2. Normality test

Statistic	IM	EM	TPI	CE	CPC
Skewness	0.245	0.387	0.118	0.294	0.356
Kurtosis	-0.77	-1.03	-0.55	-0.63	-1.070

As shown in Table 2, the normality of the data was examined using skewness and kurtosis statistics. Studies suggest a broader acceptance range, where data can be considered normally distributed if skewness lies between −2 and +2 and kurtosis between −7 and +7 [22], [28]. As shown in Table 2, all variables have skewness values ranging from 0.118 to 0.387, and kurtosis values ranging from −1.07 to −0.55. Since all values fall comfortably within the acceptable range, it can be concluded that the data distributions are approximately normal.

Table 3. Multicollinearity test

Independent Variable	Tolerance	VIF	Decision
Intrinsic motivation	.813	1.230	No multicollinearity
Extrinsic motivation	.671	1.490	No multicollinearity
Third-party influence	.691	1.446	No multicollinearity
Career exposure	.646	1.547	No multicollinearity

All four independent variables show Tolerance values well above .10 and VIF values well below 10. This confirms no multicollinearity issue among the predictors, so all four variables can be reliably retained in the regression model.

3.3 *Regression Analysis*

Table 4. Regression analysis

Predictor	B	SE	Std. β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.0075	0.2005	—	5.02	0.0001
Intrinsic motivation	0.4030	0.0445	0.4569	9.06	0.0001
Extrinsic motivation	0.1045	0.0601	0.1021	1.74	0.0831
Third-party influence	-0.0611	0.0455	-0.0647	-1.34	0.1804
Career exposure	0.2997	0.0630	0.2648	4.75	0.0001

Note. $R^2 = 0.4370$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.4296$; $F(4, 196) = 58.42$, $p < 0.0001$. Dependent variable: Career path choice.

As shown in Table 4, multiple regression analysis was used to explore how intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, the influence of third parties, and career exposure collectively affect accounting students' career path choices. The model as a whole is significant ($F(4, 196) = 58.42$, $p < 0.0001$) and accounts for 43.7% of the variance in career path choice ($R^2 = 0.437$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.430$). Of the four predictors, only intrinsic motivation ($\beta = 0.457$, $p < 0.0001$) and career exposure ($\beta = 0.265$, $p < 0.0001$) are statistically significant, with intrinsic motivation exerting nearly twice the standardized effect of career exposure. Third-party influence ($\beta = -0.065$, $p = 0.180$) and extrinsic motivation ($\beta = 0.102$, $p = 0.083$) are not significant predictors. This pattern is consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory's emphasis on self-efficacy and personal interest as central drivers of career behavior, and it extends that theory by showing that direct exposure to the profession, rather than social pressure from family, peers, or teachers, is what translates interest into a concrete career choice. The non-significance of third-party influence departs from studies that found parental and peer influence to be important in other national contexts [22]–[24], but it aligns with research suggesting that outside influence carries less weight once students have direct, first-hand exposure to the accounting profession [27]. Similarly, the comparatively small and non-significant effect of extrinsic motivation implies that, in this sample, students are not primarily choosing accounting and finance careers for salary or job security, which is at odds with studies that identified pay and employment prospects as dominant motivators [13], [19], [20] and suggests that the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic drivers may be shifting as AI-related uncertainty changes how students weigh job security against personal fit with the profession. Taken together, these results indicate that curricula and career interventions aimed at strengthening students' direct exposure to accounting practice, rather than emphasizing pay or relying on third-party persuasion, are more likely to influence their career path choices. The unexplained 56.3% of the variance suggests that other factors not captured in this model, such as personality traits, prior academic performance, or students' direct experience with AI-enabled accounting tools, also play

a meaningful role and warrant investigation in future research.

4 CONCLUSION

The findings from this research provide valuable insights into the factors influencing the career pathways of accounting and finance students at a non-state university, Sri Lanka. The high level of intrinsic motivation identified in the study suggests that students are driven by personal interests and passions when considering their career options. This finding aligns with social cognitive career theory, which posits that individuals are more likely to pursue careers that resonate with their intrinsic values. Educational institutions could leverage this insight by offering programs and workshops that align academic experiences with students' personal interests, thereby fostering greater engagement and motivation. The role of extrinsic factors, such as salary and job security, was found in this study to be comparatively weak and statistically non-significant, in contrast to studies that identified pay and job security as dominant career motivators [13], [19], [20], and consistent with other studies showing that intrinsic motivation exerts a greater influence on career choice than extrinsic incentives [24]. Family, friends, and mentors are important in influencing students' profession choices; however, in this study third-party influence was not a statistically significant predictor, echoing a previous study that similarly concluded that peer, parental, and secondary-teacher influence was not an important determinant for accounting students [27]. The choice of job pathways is found to be significantly predicted by career exposure. Students consequently lack enough expertise and comprehensive information about job opportunities in the field of management accounting. According to this study, students' preferences for their career pathways are influenced by their exposure to the workforce. This underscores the importance of developing supportive networks around students. Educational institutions could implement mentorship programs that connect students with industry professionals, providing them with guidance and insight into various career paths. These findings should be read alongside the limitations discussed at the end of this paper.

5 IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study have significant implications for educational institutions, career counselors, and professional accounting bodies. By understanding the students' motivations and influences affecting students' career choices, institutions can design targeted programs highlighting their internal values. Students' motivation and engagement may rise when academic experiences are in line with their values and personal interests. Career exposure plays a critical role in their career choice. Educational institutions can improve career-related programs by focusing on intrinsic motivation, aligning academic experiences with students' interests, and providing practical experiences, mentorship programs, and industry interactions. Moreover, professional organizations can use these insights to refine recruitment strategies, ensuring they attract well-informed and motivated graduates. Even though social influences (family, peers, and teachers) and extrinsic motivations (such as pay and job security) have less of an impact than intrinsic motivation and career exposure, they still play a role in career decisions and ought to be considered in career counseling initiatives.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is not without limitations. First, data were collected from a single private university in Sri Lanka using convenience sampling, which limits the generalizability of the findings to accounting and finance students at other institutions or in other countries. Second, the cross-sectional design captures students' career intentions at a single point in time; it cannot establish causal relationships between the predictors and career path choice, nor can it capture how these intentions evolve as students approach graduation and enter the labor market. Third, the model explains 43.7% of the variance in career path choice, indicating that other relevant factors, such as personality traits, academic performance, or direct experience with AI-enabled accounting tools, were not captured and may further explain students' career decisions. Finally, all constructs were measured using self-reported Likert-scale items, which may be subject to

common method bias. Future research could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs, drawing on multi-institutional or cross-country samples, and incorporating additional variables, such as students' AI readiness or self-efficacy, to build a more comprehensive model of accounting and finance students' career path choice.

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