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An Analysis of the Motivations and Challenges for New Seafarers in the Cruise Ship Industry

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Abstract

This thesis examined why new seafarers choose to work in the cruise ship industry and what challenges they face during their employment. The study used a qualitative approach and was based on interviews with three seafarers who have different backgrounds and different levels of maritime experience. The findings indicated that travel opportunities, international crew experience, and learning new skills were important reasons for joining the cruise industry. However, long working hours, limited shore leave, unclear promotion paths, and work life balance issues were identified as key difficulties. Financial benefits were viewed differently, depending on participants previous maritime experience.

Based on the findings, the author has introduced the Cruise Career Duality Theory, this theory illustrates the tensions between the frontstage glamour of cruise ships and the backstage reality of hard labour onboard the ship. This thesis also introduced the Seafarer Motivation Constellation, a conceptual chart of the main motivation clusters identified in the study. To make this thesis practically useful, the author designed a prototype website "SeafarerStart (http://seafarerstart.online/)" as an informational tool for students and seafarers interested to join cruise ships as a crew member.

The study concluded that career choices in the cruise industry were influenced by both, the attractive image of cruise work and the demanding workload onboard. The findings could help maritime schools and cruise companies in improving training, working conditions, and recruitment strategies for new seafarers.

Language: English
Keywords: Seafarers motivations and challenges, Cruise ship, Cruise Career Duality Theory, Cognitive dissonance, Seafarerstart.

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1 Introduction

International trade and the global economy heavily rely on maritime transport, with over 80% of goods by volume being shipped by sea (UNCTAD, 2021). The wide range of maritime operations involves many types of vessels, each of which may require specialized crews who possess different skill sets. Cruise ship operations found the industry to be an especially dynamic and fast-moving one, combining conventional maritime operations with advanced hospitality services and worldwide tourism infrastructure (Buhalis, Papathanassis, & Vafeidou, 2022). Traditionally, maritime careers were associated with on-board bulk carriers, container vessels, and tankers. The expansion of the cruise industry was once merely an upscale niche at the end of the 20th century. It suddenly transformed into a holiday choice now shared by mainstream travellers, and over 30 million passengers travel annually (CLIA, 2023). This change has opened demand for trained seafarers who can face the challenges in operating cruise ships.

With the growth in the cruise industry, it presented a demand for skilled seafarers to join the fleets. The industry is facing a crisis regarding qualified and skilled workers. A shortfall of 90,000 seafarers is expected to hit the maritime industry in 2026 (Shan, 2024). Cruise careers offer opportunities that make them particularly appealing for many new seafarers to join, like world travel opportunities, great tax-free wages, and career development in a multi-cultural environment. (Weaver, 2011). These positive factors exist alongside opposing concerns, such as tying in longer contracts to demanding working schedules and certain psychological stressors associated with isolation (Ariza-Montesa, Radicb, Arjona-Fuentesa, Han, & Law, 2021). The industry's technological evolution further complicates recruitment, as modern ships require digital literacy alongside traditional seamanship skills (Demirel E. , 2020).

Regardless of the challenges, employment in cruise lines still offers certain peculiar merits that appeal to new seafarers to the profession. Unlike ordinary cargo shipping jobs, cruise line careers come with rare benefits of extensive global travel and cultural exchange, as crew members can earn a living while scheduled to visit several countries (Weaver, 2011).

2 Background and Significance of the Study

Rapid growth of the cruise industry is unlike any other, with passenger numbers expected to exceed 39 million in 2027 (CLIA, 2023). While there is an increasing number of new seafarers into the industry, it has been contrasted with significant workforce crises, likely a turnover of over 25% of non-entry-level seafarers and a projected lack of 90,000 qualified workers by 2026 (ICS, 2023). While existing research has dealt with labour dynamics in cargo shipping thoroughly (Notteboom, Pallis, De Langen, & Papachristou, 2013), less attention has been given in the understanding of why new generations of maritime professionals are reluctant to pursue or continue their careers in the cruise industry, despite its very unique advantages, global travel and remuneration benefits compared to other sectors.

Previous research shows changing expectations among seafarers, particularly regarding work-life balance, career development, and wellbeing within the maritime sector. This research uses a qualitative approach, interviews conducted with seafarers from deck and engine department working on cruise ships are included. This research examines how lifestyle factors, financial incentives, and career development influence career choices and job satisfaction.

This research provides valuable insight and helps in understanding the expectation and reality dynamics that are experienced by the seafarers working onboard cruise ships. By conducting interviews and recording seafarers' experiences, this research has explored deeper into the examining motivations and challenges associated with cruise ship careers. The findings are relevant for maritime institutes, cruise companies and for the new seafarers wanting to join the cruise ships.

2.1 Aim and Objectives

This thesis aims to examine the factors that attract new seafarers to pursue the cruise ship industry. Below are the objectives of this research:

- Analysing the influence of lifestyle and travel opportunities on cruise ship career choices.

- Examining the significance of financial incentives and remuneration on career choices.
- Identifying the challenges and benefits associated with working in the cruise ship industry.

2.2 Research Questions

Following are the research questions that are answered in this thesis:

- How do the lifestyle and travel opportunities in cruise ship influence the career choices of new seafarers?
- How do new seafarers identify opportunities for skill development and professional growth while working on cruise ships?
- To what extent do salaries and financial incentives attract new seafarers to join cruise ships?

2.3 Limitations

While these findings give valuable insights, the study was limited to maintain depth and relevance. The sample size was kept small and consisted of three participants with a background of deck and engine department. Although only one participant fully matched the intended target group of new seafarers, the other participants with their relevant knowledge and expertise provided as valuable and diverse information.

The participants were also of different ranks, backgrounds, and maritime experience. Each of these differences can be seen as both positive and negative influence with respect to the themes brought out, especially in the areas of financial expectations and work-life balance. The study was based on self-reported interview data, which is common in qualitative research and allows participants to share their personal experiences, while also recognising that responses may be influenced by individual interpretations.

3 Literature review

The workforce issues in the cruise industry are being examined quite thoroughly in academia in the context of what brings new seafarers to such sector. This research aimed to consolidate the existing academic knowledge by structuring it around three central topics: financial incentives versus lifestyle considerations, career opportunities, and how people deal with the challenges. Pay remains the largest factor in career choice in the marine industry. Salaries are a significant factor in attracting individuals to the seafaring profession. Sufficient salary has a substantial impact on their job satisfaction and retention (Umut Yildirim, 2022). Many countries offer tax exemptions for seafarers, allowing them to retain a larger portion of their income compared to other professions (Nikolaeva Dimitrova, 2010). The character of cruise occupations provides attractive aspects. Attractiveness of global travel opportunities: 78% of new hires valued the opportunity to travel to multiple destinations (Weaver, 2011). Travel nowadays is not what it used to be. It now rather consists of long contracts and isolation which can negatively affect the seafarers. Long contracts and isolation are significant factors contributing to the decline of seafarers' mental wellness. Which ultimately leads many seafarers to consider leaving this industry. The report from Helen & Ellis, 2019, highlights that lengthy periods at sea and repeated absences from home create emotional strain, with 47% of seafarers feeling their work impacts their mental health, and a notable portion indicating they are likely to leave the industry soon.

Career development and promotion opportunities are among the key factors that affect recruitment of these seafarers. Skill diversification, with hospitality and digital navigation training being specifically mentioned, was found to be central to career satisfaction (Maritime Trainer, 2025). Long contracts and very limited shore leave can contribute to high attrition rates in the cruise industry, as crew members experience job insecurity, restricted free time, and inadequate opportunities for family contact, leading to dissatisfaction and potential turnover (Scherbl, 2020).

The cruise line industry has highly competitive financial compensation packages. Most of

these packages typically include salaries that are free from tax, performance bonuses, and gratuity structures. The tax free nature of these salaries allows crew members to retain a larger portion of their earnings, which is particularly appealing for those working in international waters (Bolt, 2015). It would greatly help to host professional development opportunities where employees can acquire transferable skills that are relevant in areas like hospitality management, multilingual communication, and crisis response and it is an acknowledged area within cruise tourism employee management research (Rungroueng & Monpanthong, 2023).

The environmental impacts of cruise ship tourism in marine sensitive areas require harder and best standards and even better enforcement of those regulations. To resolve this, big cruise liners are investing in new and updated technologies, such as gas turbines to reduce emissions and to comply with present regulations. (Johnson, 2002). This technological transition has created a skills gap where traditional maritime training tends to fall short in preparing seafarers for the operation of advanced scrubber systems, LNG propulsion plants, or hybrid power configurations (Papathanasiou, et al., 2018). As a result, new seafarers in the industry must now balance the conventional aspects of cruise employment as well as they need to keep up with the constantly changing technical skills.

The nature of the psychological contract between cruise line companies and their crews has changed considerably in the new, post-pandemic era. The research finds that younger generations of seafarers and maritime employees value work-life balance and mental health support over and above other generations before them, leading to a mismatch with the model of traditional cruise employment (Cooper, Holmes, Pforr, & Shanka, 2019). Cruise lines had to change their human resource strategies in the current generation force, as some of the pioneering operators in the industry have started addressing shortening contracts, improving connectivity packages, and even programs in wellness onboard (Gibson & Walters, 2012). Industries are increasingly focusing on building work environments that are flexible and can adapt to the needs and expectations of today's employees.

Industry reports have recently sounded what appear to be alarm bells regarding the growing difference between growth within the industry and the maintenance of a stable workforce. While cruise lines bring innovation to their recruitment campaigns for younger

employees, salaries remain very low, specifically for entry-level positions. Despite attractive recruitment campaigns, entry-level salaries in the cruise industry are often insufficient to meet the expectations of younger workers, leading to potential talent shortages (Raub, 2023). It appears that now that employees are concentrating more and more on factors beyond their paycheques and travel opportunities, these may no longer suffice as strong retention tools. Factors such as work life balance and management support are increasingly recognized as vital for employee retention (Ramachandran, 2022). The industry must now redefine its value proposition to suit the redefined workplace expectations of seafarers, particularly those belonging to the Millennial and Generation Z, who now make up entry-level positions (Inga, Kitada, & Valionienė, 2023).

These challenges are intensified by rapid change in onboard roles due to paperless sailing technology. The seafarer could reasonably expect a career progression path, but now, no job security can be expected after their job gets disrupted (Kitada & Baum-Talmor, 2019). Guest services staff work with AI booking systems, while engineers must adapt to smart monitoring technologies. This skills revolution needs close collaboration between cruise operators and maritime training institutions to ensure that the curricula remain relevant for continuing professional development.

Though the existing literature accounts in detail for the labour dynamics of cargo shipping, it says very little about workforce issues in the cruise industry. Through a qualitative research approach, this study uses qualitative interviews to analyse how lifestyle considerations, financial incentives, and professional development opportunities play an important role in affecting career choices. The results provide valuable information to maritime education institutions and cruise operators seeking to improve mechanisms by which workforces might be recruited and retained. Sustainable development of professionals in the cruise industry would internally depend on attracting and retaining qualified professionals in its workforce. The study helps to understand the support needed for workforce development strategies, working condition improvements, and better communication of career opportunities to achieve that end. By working on those important things, research would help ensure that this industry becomes sustainable in the long term as it becomes increasingly relevant to global tourism and transportation networks.

3.1 Conceptual Framework

The framework is applied to interview data from deck and engine department participants The study's conceptual framework consists of the following components:

Independent Variables:

1. **Lifestyle and Travel Opportunities**
   This was explored through the perceived benefits of big cruise ships, an exposure to people from different cultures, and leisure activities on board.
2. **Financial Incentives**
   This involves salary, bonus, tax, and fringe benefits.
3. **Perceived Skill Development and Career Growth**
   This was examined through participants perception of career opportunities for promotions, leadership positions, and certifications.
4. **Perceived Work life balance and Mental Health Support**
   This was interpreted based on interview discussion about rest periods in addition to shore leave policies and wellness programs available aboard.

Dependent Variables:

1. **Career choice in the cruise industry**
   Refers to how likely seafarers are to choose cruise industry over other maritime industries.

Moderating Variable:

1. **Prior Maritime Experience**
   Refers to how experienced seafarers differ from new seafarers in how they view the factors that attract individuals to choose cruise ship industry.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Robert W., Steven D., & Gail, 1994). It is a useful framework which explains how a person´s career decision making is shaped based on the three interrelated factors i.e. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and environmental supports. SCCT provides a general framework for this research.

3.2.1 Cognitive Dissonance and the Cruise Career Duality Theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) further explains the career choices of new seafarers. It explains the psychological discomfort and confusion that is raised when expectations do not match reality, which leads individuals to reduce the tension through either rationalisation or adjustment. In the cruise industry, this occurs when the glamorous image of cruise ship life conflicts with the demanding working conditions experienced by new crew members, these include long hours, very limited social time, perceived low wages relative to workload, and restricted opportunities for going ashore.

This study draws on these principles to propose an applied conceptual theory, referred in this research as Cruise Career Duality Theory: Expectation – Reality Dissonance in Cruise Employment, the author's conceptual explanation for how new seafarers resolve the difference between expectation and lived experience. The theory proposes that cruise ship employment is symbolised by a duality between two contrasting dimensions: the frontstage glamour projected through cruise company marketing and travel imagery, and the backstage reality which is defined by demanding work schedules, operational pressures, and intensive labour requirements.

Despite this contradiction, seafarers are still attracted to cruise careers due to a combination of symbolic capital, such as perceived status, international experience, and personal identity enhancement. These are the cognitive adjustments that allow seafarers to justify or minimise the hardships they face onboard. In doing so, the Cruise Career Duality Theory builds on established psychological frameworks by explaining why seafarers still want to work in cruise ship industry, or remain motivated towards it, which is ultimately a career environment that simultaneously offers both, high appeal, and significant challenges. A visual representation of the main motivational clusters identified in this study

is presented in the Seafarer Motivation Constellation (Appendix 2). This diagram provides an illustrative summary of the key motivational themes highlighting seafarers' decision to pursue cruise ship careers.

Below Figure 2 presents the conceptual diagram of the Cruise Career Duality Theory. It shows the process through which expectation, reality gaps and cognitive dissonance influences career choices and retention.

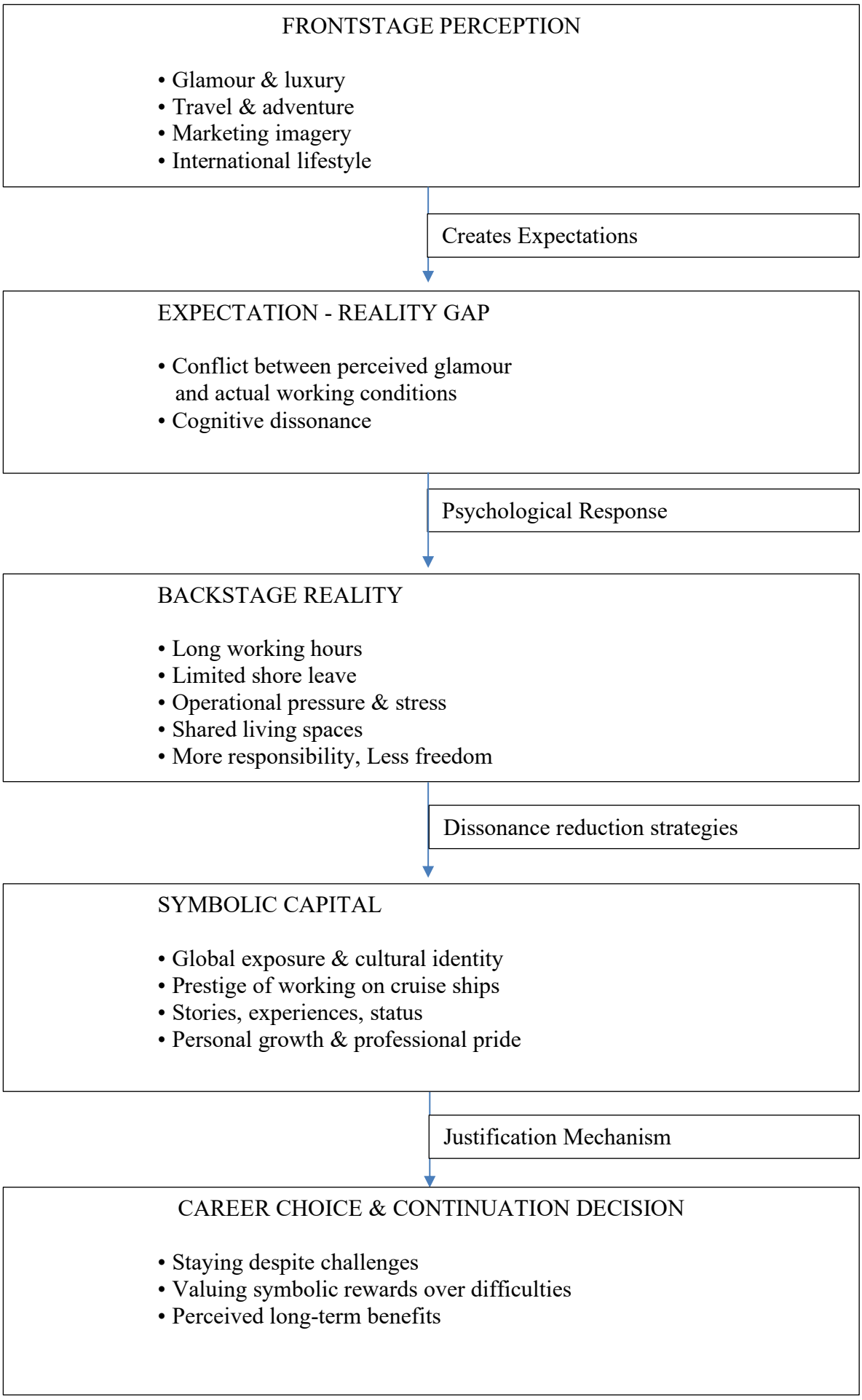

Figure: Conceptual Diagram – Cruise Career Duality Theory

4 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of the various factors that affect the career choices of new seafarers in maritime sector towards the cruise industry. A qualitative approach is best suited for this study as it allows for an in depth understanding of the experiences and motivations, while also highlighting the difficulties faced along this path while it aligns with the study´s aim of analysing lifestyle benefits, financial incentives, opportunities for career development. (Creswell, 2013).

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) which emphasizes understanding individuals "lived experiences". This method is suitable since it reflects subjective perspectives of seafarers providing a deep understanding of their career decision-making processes. IPA aims to explore how participants understands their personal and social worlds, which is important for understanding the nuanced factors influencing their career trajectories.

4.2 Participant selection

The target population is new seafarers (0-5 years of experience) from deck and engine department with an experience in the cruise industry. Purposive sampling is used. Purposive sampling ensures participants have relevant experience (Patton, 2014). The sample size consisted of three participants.

Participants were contacted via professional networking and social media platforms like LinkedIn. This study specifically targeted seafarers who are with in their first 5 years of experience in cruise industry. This specific selection was aimed to understand the perspectives of those directly engaged in the early career challenges and opportunities.

4.3 Data Collection

The main data collection method was semi structured interviews conducted via Zoom/Google Meets because of the interviews to accommodate participants schedule and

location. The questionnaire consisted of short demographics questions to gather data on participants age, nationality, role on the ship and level of experience. This information was crucial for comparative analysis of the finding.

The main part of the interview consisted of the interview questionnaire (see APPENDIX 1). The questions explored the independent variables in the conceptual framework, including financial incentives and lifestyle and travel. Skill development and career growth were also included as well as questions related to challenges and work life balance.

4.4 Data Analysis

The analysis was based on the information gathered from the interviews. A demographic profile table was created to summarise the participants background and experience levels. The table was used to conduct a comparative analysis, which means that the author has tried to find patterns and difference in participants perspectives and recognise patterns.

Finally, the findings from the interviews were crossed checked with relevant industry findings and reports to provide a broader context for the results.

5 Findings

This chapter presents the findings that were a result of the semi structured interviews with three seafarers working in the cruise industry. The analysis was organised according to the study's conceptual framework, focusing on lifestyle and travel opportunities, financial incentives, career growth and skill development, work life balance, and the main challenges faced in the industry. A demographic table is presented first to provide a background overview of the participants.

5.1 Participant Demographics

The demographic information collected in the initial interview questions is summarised in the table below. The table illustrates participants nationality, rank, and years of experience, giving a broad comparative understanding of motivations and challenges within the cruise industry.

Table: Participants Demographics

Participant	**Age**	**Nationality**	**Rank/ Department**	**Cruise Industry Experience**	**Previous Maritime Experience**
Kristoffer Lahti-Nuuttila	34	Finnish	1st Officer	Since 2021	None
Jouni Nylander	35	Finnish	1st Engineer	Since 2015	Cargo, Navy, ROPAX
Satnam Singh	45	Indian	Captain	1 year	Cargo and Tankers

Although the study aimed to include new seafarers (0–5 years of experience), only one participant fell completely within this range. However, the two additional participants offered extensive backgrounds that gave valuable comparative insights, especially regarding differences between early career and experienced seafarers. This aligns with the interpretative phenomenological approach, where diverse experiences help enrich the understanding of shared concepts.

5.2 Lifestyle and Travel Opportunities

Lifestyle related motivations were seen across all participants. The possibility of travelling internationally and experiencing diverse cultures was repeated as an appealing factor. For Kristoffer, “exotic travel” and the variability of the environment were significant aspects influencing his decision to join cruise ships. Similarly, Jouni stated that waking up in new destinations was one of the main motivations to work in this sector, although he acknowledged that shore leave was often limited: “From 10 ports you can visit 6 for a few hours”. Satnam also highlighted that cruise ships routinely visit “exotic locations,” which played a key role in his interest in the industry.

However, despite the attractiveness of travel opportunities, two participants said that the actual amount of time available to go ashore was sometimes reduced due to work demands onboard. This finding aligned with already existing research emphasising that while travel remains appealing, it is often overshadowed by long work hours and operational burdens. Overall, lifestyle and travel opportunities were perceived as important but not the primary reason in long-term job satisfaction.

5.3 Financial Incentives

Financial incentives showed significant variation in how strongly they influenced participants’ decisions. Although literature frequently emphasises high salaries as a central attraction for seafarers, this was not heavily reflected in the interviews conducted by the author.

Kristoffer noted that salary was “not a big part of choosing cruise ships,” as his decision was instead influenced by opportunities to work with advanced technology and social interaction.

Jouni similarly stated that although salary was important, it was not the main factor, and cruise ship salaries were “quite low compared to other sectors” such as tankers or offshore operations.

In contrast, Satnam provided a different perspective, describing cruise industry pay as “highly competitive” and mentioning that high wages and additional benefits significantly supported mental wellbeing and job satisfaction.

The findings therefore indicated a difference between participants with long maritime careers in cargo/tanker sectors and those who primarily worked within cruise shipping.

Experienced officers coming from high-pay ship industries perceived the cruise wages as lower, whereas those coming to cruise ships for the first time perceived the compensation as very competitive.

5.4 Career Growth and Skill Development

Skill development was considered an important motivational factor. All participants said that cruise ships offer valuable learning opportunities due to the complexity and scale of operations.

Kristoffer underlined the importance of social and managerial skills gained through working with diverse crew members, stating that advancing in rank requires strong interpersonal and leadership abilities.

Jouni emphasised the international environment combined with exposure to advanced machinery and systems, describing cruise ships as a strong “learning place” with modern technology.

Satnam noted that “crowd management” was the most valuable skill he gained during his time on board, which is specific to passenger ships and not typically required in cargo-ship operations.

Training availability was consistently mentioned as a positive aspect. Participants confirmed that companies provide mandatory and voluntary courses, simulator training, and online modules. However, the clarity of career progression pathways varied. Kristoffer described advancement within his company as “tight and difficult,” whereas Jouni stated that promotion opportunities exist but are highly competitive, and advancement was not his personal focus. Satnam was unsure about advancement trajectories, partly due to the industry disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.5 Work Life Balance and Mental Health

Work life balance challenges were evident across all interviews. Long work hours were consistently reported, with typical days involving 10–12 hours of duty. Kristoffer explained that mandatory hours were supplemented by additional administrative work, making the schedule demanding. Jouni noted that although 10-hour days were standard, flexibility sometimes allowed adjustments to accommodate short shore visits. Satnam explicitly stated that short leave periods were a major challenge in his role.

Mental health support systems were widely accepted positively, with all participants reporting the availability of onboard programmes and some kind of confidential support channels. However, Jouni and Satnam highlighted that many crew members fear while reporting issues due to concerns about job security, which echoes findings in prior research on mental wellbeing in the maritime sector.

Contract length played an important role in work life balance. While Kristoffer appreciated longer contracts because they allow for extended vacations afterwards, Jouni explained that long rotations discourage many new seafarers, especially those with families. Satnam confirmed that long contracts significantly affected his job satisfaction.

5.6 Challenges in the Cruise Ship Industry

All interviews highlighted many challenges for seafarers in the cruise industry, the main challenges are as follow:

- **Long working hours and extended contracts:** All participants described the workload as heavy.
- **Limited shore leave:** Travel opportunities exist but are often shorter than expected.
- **Highly competitive promotion pathways:** Particularly noted by Kristoffer and Jouni.
- **Operational pressure and stress:** Satnam described cruise life as “very stressful,” emphasising on the administrative burden and responsibility placed on senior officers.
- **Salary competitiveness across sectors:** Cruise salaries were considered lower compared to tanker and offshore industries by participants with cargo backgrounds.

Jouni also pointed out that some cruise members hesitated to make new decisions because they feared they would be dismissed if they tried out something new that is not a standard in the cruise industry.

5.7 New vs. Experienced Seafarers Comparison

This study revealed several differences between new seafarers and experienced seafarers:

- **Motivations:**

  Newer seafarers valued travel and social interaction more strongly.

  Experienced officers focused more on ship size, technology, and stable rotation patterns.

- **Financial considerations:**

  The new seafarer viewed salaries as competitive.

  Others considered cruise pay lower compared to tanker/offshore sectors.

- **Career progression:**

  All reported competition, but the youngest officer expressed the greatest frustration with slow promotions.

- **Work life balance:**

  More experienced seafarers felt long contracts as manageable.
  Newer seafarers perceived contract length as unsatisfying.

These differences support the assumption that previous maritime experience moderates career perceptions and influences expectations regarding compensation and career growth.

6 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influence new seafarers' decisions to continue careers in the cruise industry, particularly focusing on lifestyle considerations, financial incentives, skill development and the challenges they encounter during their time onboard. The findings from the interviews align with the themes discussed in the literature, while also contributing new insights regarding the moderating influence of previous maritime experience and contradictory expectations among seafarers at various stages of their careers. There are many departments working in a cruise ship including hotel, catering, entertainment, and medical services. However, this thesis is limited to the interviews conducted with the officer from deck and engine departments. The responses from hotel and service departments may yield a different perspective due to the differences in working conditions, responsibilities, and schedules.

Lifestyle and travel opportunities turned out to be a strong motivational factor, aligning with studies and highlighting global and exotic travel as one of the most attractive elements of cruise ship employment (Weaver, 2011). All interviewees valued the opportunity to visit multiple destinations, although two interviewees noted that actual shore leave is often limited due to operational duties. This reflects findings from Helen and Ellis (2019), who reported that long working hours reduce crew members' ability to fully benefit from travel opportunities. The thesis also suggests that while travel is an appealing entry-level motivator, it becomes less appealing over time as priorities shift due to the work.

Financial incentives showed mixed results across interviewees. The literature frequently notes that competitive salaries and tax benefits serve as major recruitment drivers (Nikolaeva Dimitrova, 2010; Umut Yildirim, 2022). However, only one interviewee expressed the salary structure as highly competitive, while two interviewees emphasized that cruise ship salaries are lower compared to tanker and offshore industries. This difference of opinion is because they had previous maritime experience. Which means that seafarers coming from cargo ships may have different salary expectations than those entering cruise shipping directly. The findings, therefore, support the conceptual framework that previous experience influences how seafarers evaluate the attractiveness of salaries and incentives.

Skill development and career growth were seen as important factors, aligning with thesis, that opportunities for continuous learning and trainings are essential for motivating seafarers (Maritime Trainer, 2025). Participants stated gaining significant soft skills, particularly leadership and communication, as well as technical skills related to using advanced systems installed on the bridge. However, concerns regarding slow or unclear promotion pathways were expressed. This supports previous research suggesting that although cruise companies invest in training, career advancement remains competitive and sometimes unclear (Scherbl, 2020). These findings strengthen the importance of transparent career progression structures as a retention tool for new seafarers.

Work life balance challenges were consistently reported, showing concerns in the literature related to long contracts, very limited rest periods, and psychological stressors associated with isolation (Ariza-Montesa et al., 2021). The interviews confirmed that 10 to 12 hour workdays are standard, and that contract length significantly influences job satisfaction. While experienced seafarers with prior maritime experience appeared more used to such demanding schedules, newer seafarers found these conditions stressful. Mental health support programmes were available on all vessels, which aligns with increasing industry efforts to sort out and help seafarers' wellbeing (Senbursa, 2024). Nonetheless, participants noted that fear of job loss discouraged some crew from seeking help, evident from the findings by Gibson and Walters (2012).

The findings of this study also align with the author's proposed Cruise Career Duality Theory, which offers an understanding of the contradictions between motivational appeal and operational difficulty in cruise ship industry. Participants expressed strong attraction to the opportunities also to the social prestige associated with cruise work, while they fully acknowledge the demanding schedules, limited personal time, and work stress that form the hidden "backstage" reality. This difference aligns with the cognitive dissonance theory that is described by Festinger (1957), where individuals resolve conflicting expectations by focusing on symbolic rewards they would receive, such as international and exotic travel, career identity, and personal accomplishment. The Cruise Career Duality Theory matches the existing literature by showing how seafarers psychologically talk themselves out of the gap between expectation and reality, helping to explain why the industry continues to attract newcomers despite the great structural challenges.

Finally, the challenges such as limited shore leave, office work, slow promotion rates, and work stress, are well explained in existing literature. But this study adds value by highlighting the differences in expectations between new and experienced seafarers. Those with previous experience in other maritime sectors thought of cruise ships as less tiresome, while those entering directly from maritime school viewed the environment as a place to get familiar with the newest technologies. This difference highlights how important the selected recruitment strategies are to specific segments of the workforce.

Overall, the findings from the interviews support much of the existing research but also highlight the variety of experiences within the cruise industry's workforce which are not available on other kinds of ships. They reveal that while the industry offers unique lifestyle opportunities and access to advanced technology, big improvements are still needed in areas such as work life balance, career progression, and psychological safety.

7 Conclusion

This study analysed the motivations and challenges influencing career choices among new seafarers in the cruise ship industry. Through qualitative interviews, several ideas emerged that help explain why individuals choose to enter this sector and how their experiences shape their career outlook.

The findings show that lifestyle and travel opportunities are important initial motivators, but their influence reduces when faced with long working hours and limited shore leave. Financial incentives play a more complex role, while cruise ship salaries are attractive to some, others particularly those with tanker or offshore backgrounds, perceive them as less competitive. This highlights the importance of considering prior maritime experience as a moderating factor in career decision making.

Skill development opportunities were widely acknowledged, especially exposure to advanced technology, multicultural communication, and crowd management. However, challenges related to slow or unclear promotion pathways can damage long term retention of these cruise ship employees. Work life balance remains a critical issue across ranks, with interviewees highlighting that demanding schedules, lengthy contracts, and administrative burdens are major stressors.

Overall, this thesis showed that career choice within the cruise industry is shaped by a combination of personal motivations and perceived benefits. While the cruise industry provides a unique opportunity for travel, professional development, and cultural exposure; meaningful improvements in employment conditions and support systems are very important for attracting and retaining new generations of seafarers. These findings could support recruitment agencies and cruise ship managers in making more informed training decisions within the industry.

8 Reflexivity

As the author of this thesis and a maritime student preparing for a career at sea, my background had an inevitable influence on my research approach. My interest in the cruise ship industry was the main reason for writing this thesis and it shaped my focus on the lifestyle, travel, and career development that were discussed in the thesis. At the same time, my limited personal sea experience meant that the lived realities described by interviewees were sometimes surprising and it challenged my earlier assumptions about working on a cruise ship.

I was able to create understanding with the interviewees but at the same time it was demanding to reflect on the issue carefully so as I would not impose my expectations on the data. During the analysis, I deliberately chose to look at the interviewees experiences through their eyes rather than comparing them to my own views of the industry. I linked interpretations back to the conceptual framework which all helped in maintaining fairness. This reflexive process has added value to the study by recognizing that my positionality might have been a factor in both data collection and interpretation.

9 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations, following recommendations can be considered for the future studies.

Firstly, future studies could consider larger sample size of seafarers to provide a wider and clearer understanding of early career motivations. Research could focus on cadets, apprentices, junior officers, and new seafarers which could reveal trends and points which differ from senior officers or seafarers with diverse backgrounds.

Secondly, it would be interesting to research comparatively between different ship types such as cruise ships, tankers, container ships and offshore vessels to understand better how expectations and motivations varies around maritime sectors.

Thirdly, as cruise ships are becoming more and more popular and with that the technological advancements are happening at faster than ever rate, future research could examine the need for digitalization trainings. This would help to retain seafarers in this industry and keep their knowledge up to date.

Finally, future studies could test and refine digital tools such as the SeafarerStart (http://seafarerstart.online/) concept (Appendix 3) with larger groups of cadets and new seafarers.

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Interview Questions

1. What is your age and nationality?
2. What is your current role or department?
3. How many years have you worked in the cruise industry?
4. Do you have any maritime experience outside of cruise ships?
5. What factors were most important to you when choosing to work in the cruise industry?
6. How do employment conditions (such as pay structure or benefits) influence your overall job satisfaction?
7. How would you describe the competitiveness of compensation packages in the cruise industry?
8. What motivates you to continue working in this industry?
9. How much did travel opportunities influence your decision to work in the cruise industry?
10. Has the reality of cruise life matched your expectations?
11. What is the most valuable skill you have gained during your time in the industry?
12. Are the career advancement paths clear?
13. What types of training would best support your career growth?
14. What are your main work life balance challenges?
15. How do long contracts affect your job satisfaction?
16. Is the onboard mental health support adequate?
17. What factors would make you consider leaving the cruise industry?
18. What one change would make this career more attractive to you?

Seafarer Motivation Constellation

SeafarerStart, A concept website developed based on thesis.

SeafarerStart (http://seafarerstart.online/) is a prototype website concept created by the Muhammad Zaryab Naqvi as a practical outcome of the bachelor's thesis "An Analysis of the Motivations and Challenges for New Seafarers in the Cruise Ship Industry" for Novia University of Applied Sciences. The purpose of the website is to showcase the main findings of the thesis into an accessible, digital format for future seafarers, maritime students and, indirectly, maritime schools and cruise companies.

The website is made on the idea of the Cruise Career Duality Theory, which describes the gap between the frontstage glamour and the backstage reality of cruise ship work. Instead of only presenting information, SeafarerStart will help new seafarers to actively reflect on their own expectations, motivations and readiness for life at sea. In this way, the websites aim is to reduce unrealistic expectations and help decrease future disappointment before the first contract.

The main target users were maritime students who are considering cruise ship careers or are about to start their first contract. The content is written in clear language and focuses on the themes that came from the interviews, which are; long working hours, shared cabins, limited shore leave, mental fatigue, multicultural crew life, symbolic capital, and career progression. Each main section of the thesis is represented in a corresponding section on the website including, Reality vs Glamour, Life Onboard, Skills and Career Paths, etc. In addition to static information, SeafarerStart includes many simple yet interactive tools that are directly based on the thesis findings:

- an **expectations checker**, where users can tick and choose statements about hours, cabins and distance from home and receive a short reflection on how aligned they are with common cruise contracts
- a short **"Is cruise life right for you?"** quiz, which describes the main personal and psychological demands explained in the study
- a **motivation profile tool**, which helps users see whether their motivations are only symbolic, financial or lifestyle-oriented.
- a **question generator**, which provides concrete questions that students can ask companies or schools about workload, wellbeing, cabins and promotion before signing a contract

The Seafarer Motivation Constellation, developed in this thesis, is also added as an illustrative diagram to show how different motivational factors (travel, symbolic capital, money, growth and career) can interact in an students decision to go to sea.

SeafarStart should be seen as a concept and prototype instead of a final commercial product. It has been designed by the author based on qualitative data and existing theory, but it has not yet been tested exclusively with user groups. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how the results of the thesis can be applied in practice and it also suggests one possible direction for future collaboration between maritime education, cruise companies and students in preparing new seafarers for the cruise ship work.