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Factors influencing migration intention of undergraduates in Sri Lanka: ‘About more than employment’

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examine the factors influencing Sri Lankan undergraduates' intention to migrate. Persistent economic, social, and political challenges have driven many youngsters and professionals to leave their Country of Origin (COO). The economic collapse triggered by COVID-19 further intensified this trend, leading to a sharp increase in outward migration. Recently, a growing number of Sri Lankan undergraduates and skilled professionals have expressed a strong desire to relocate abroad, often immediately after completing secondary education. For this study, a sample of 385 undergraduates from state and non-state universities across Sri Lanka was analysed. Given the national concerns of brain drain and shortages of trained and skilled workers, the study specifically focused on understanding undergraduates' aspirations to migrate. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied to identify and test the variables influencing migration intentions within the Sri Lankan context. The findings provide a holistic picture of the drivers of undergraduate migration. These carry important implications not only for students but also for policymakers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), by informing policies and strategies that could encourage young people to realise their potential within Sri Lanka rather than abroad.

1. Introduction

Investment in human capital is a key driver of economic growth and competitiveness (Baidybekova et al., 2022). Migration is another structural factor shaping population and labour markets (Alam & Mamun, 2022). International student migration has grown steadily, driven by educational opportunities, employment and cultural experiences (Weber & Van Mol, 2023). Sri Lanka also shows a similar trend, with outbound student numbers increasing between 2013 and 2017 (UNESCO, 2020).

In Sri Lanka, limited university capacity forces many qualified students to seek overseas education. For example, of 277,625 students who passed the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) exam in 2020, only 23 % secured state university admission (Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL), 2022). This has contributed to rising outbound student flows, often supported by private placement agencies or

international scholarships (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). A string of recent crises—including the 2019 Easter attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 economic collapse—have further intensified migration pressures (EconomyNext, 2023; Joseph & Dissanayake, 2022). Record numbers of passports were issued in 2022, coinciding with youth dissatisfaction, unemployment, and deteriorating living standards (Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), 2022; CBSL, 2022; International Organization for Migration, 2020).

While migration has long been studied in Sri Lanka, most empirical work has focused on labour migration or remittances (Jayasuriya & Opeskin, 2015; Jayawardena, 2020). Less attention was given to undergraduate migration intention during the current crisis period, when political instability, rising inequality, and shifting social norms intersect with economic push–pull factors (Ekanayake, 2022; Weeraratne et al., 2022). This represents an important gap to be explored empirically.

Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by modelling three

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domains—community and political concerns, economic factors, and social norms—as predictors of migration intention among Sri Lankan undergraduates. The study pursues three objectives: (1) to establish reliable and valid measures of the three domains and migration intention; (2) to estimate their relative effects using a structural model; and (3) to discuss implications for policymakers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

We used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach and our design is well-suited to this problem for several reasons. First, it captures undergraduate perspectives during an acute crisis, providing evidence beyond pre-crisis labour migration accounts. Second, the sample spans state and non-state HEIs across provinces, ensuring heterogeneity. Third, the model integrates political, economic, and normative factors jointly, rather than in isolation. Finally, the use of PLS-SEM with full transparency enhances replicability and interpretability (Weston & Gore, 2006; Puteh & Azman Ong, 2017).

Empirically, we provide evidence on undergraduate migration drivers in Sri Lanka's crisis context. Conceptually, we highlight the joint influence of political, economic, and social factors on intention. Practically, the findings can inform targeted HEI and government strategies to reduce talent outflows and mitigate brain drain risks.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops the hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the methodology, while Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 discusses the implications of the findings. Section 6 highlights the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research. Finally, Section 7 provides the conclusion.

2. Literature review

The literature reviewed for this study was sourced from peer-reviewed journals and reputable databases, ensuring coverage of migration intention, undergraduate mobility, and the role of political, social, and economic drivers. These three domains emerged as the most consistent determinants in prior research and were therefore selected as the independent variables in our model, with undergraduate migration intention serving as the dependent variable.

Migration intention is shaped by multiple drivers, often grouped into political, social, and economic domains (Blazhevskaya, 2017; Weber & Van Mol, 2023). Regarding the Sri Lankan context, these three areas—community and political concerns, social norms, and economic factors—emerged as most salient in prior research and recent crisis commentary (Ekanayake, 2022; Weeraratne et al., 2022). This section reviews each domain, which in turn, highlights empirical findings from other contexts, and positions our study within these debates.

2.1. Community and political concerns

Political instability, weak governance, and limited protection of rights are well-established push factors for migration. For instance, a case study in Kosovo showed that civil conflict, unemployment, and state fragility fuelled youth emigration (Blazhevskaya, 2017). In Central America, public attention to youth migration highlighted how insecurity and political instability interact with socioeconomic drivers (Nichols et al., 2017).

Sri Lanka's context reflects similar dynamics. Studies note that undergraduates face high unemployment after graduation, pushing them to consider overseas options (Weerasinghe & Karunarathne, 2022, pp. 255–266). Political corruption and poor working conditions have encouraged professional outflows, such as engineers migrating to Australia (Wijesinghe & Jayawardane, 2021). Long-term trends also point to “brain drain” tied to governance shifts, currency restrictions, and language policies (Wickramasekara, 2010). Comparative evidence supports this link. In Hong Kong, migration intentions rose sharply in response to socio-political changes and declining trust in institutions (Chan et al., 2022). Similarly, research on Thailand and Laos suggests

that political violence and restrictive policies drive mobility beyond economic factors (Baird, 2022).

Based on this evidence, we propose the first hypothesis:

H1. There is a significant impact of community and political concerns on the migration intention among undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

2.2. Social norms

Migration is also influenced by perceived expectations and behaviours of peers, family, and community. Social norms shape attitudes toward mobility by signalling what is “normal” or desirable within a group (Bicchieri et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2021). Theories of planned behaviour confirm that subjective norms—alongside attitudes and perceived control—predict migration willingness (Willekens, 2021).

In practice, these pressures are visible across contexts. Hungarian and Romanian youth, for example, reported that friends' and relatives' migration strongly predicted their own decisions (Gödri & Feleky, 2017). For Sri Lankans, social bonding factors such as family income needs and aspirations for higher status have long played a role (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). Social learning also matters: communities where migration is common generate networks that lower barriers for the next wave (Chen et al., 2008).

Contemporary Sri Lankan examples are evident. Many undergraduates are motivated by peers migrating to destinations like Korea, where better wages and low entry requirements make mobility feasible (Jayawardane, 2020; Wijesooriya, 2017). Social networks thus amplify both push and pull factors, reinforcing migration as a normative pathway.

We therefore hypothesize:

H2. There is a significant impact of social norms on the migration intention among undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

2.3. Economic factors

Economic push–pull drivers remain central in migration research. Global downturns and inflation intensify unemployment and living-cost pressures, prompting youth to seek opportunities abroad (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Recessions have been shown to accelerate migration both in developed and developing contexts (Rasamoelison et al., 2021; Redlin, 2023).

Sri Lanka's crisis provides a stark case. Inflation peaked at nearly 70 % in 2022, while food prices rose above 60 %, ranking among the world's highest (CBSL, 2022; TradingEconomics, 2022). Shortages of fuel and medicine created severe hardships, and over 700,000 passports were issued in 2022 alone (Nilar, 2022). These conditions have intensified migration pressures across professions, from IT graduates to health workers (Ranasinghe, 2023).

Prior Sri Lankan studies confirm that undergraduates perceive economic stress as a dominant push factor. High unemployment, limited career opportunities, and low wages were consistently linked to intentions to study or work abroad (Senanayake, 2022; Weeraratne et al., 2022). For example, engineering graduates often leave for countries offering stable salaries and professional pathways (Wijesinghe & Jayawardane, 2021).

Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

H3. There is a significant impact of economic factors on the migration intention among undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

2.4. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Drawing on the reviewed literature, we conceptualise migration intention as a function of three predictor domains: community and political concerns, social norms, and economic factors. Fig. 1 illustrates this model. Together, these hypotheses test whether undergraduates'

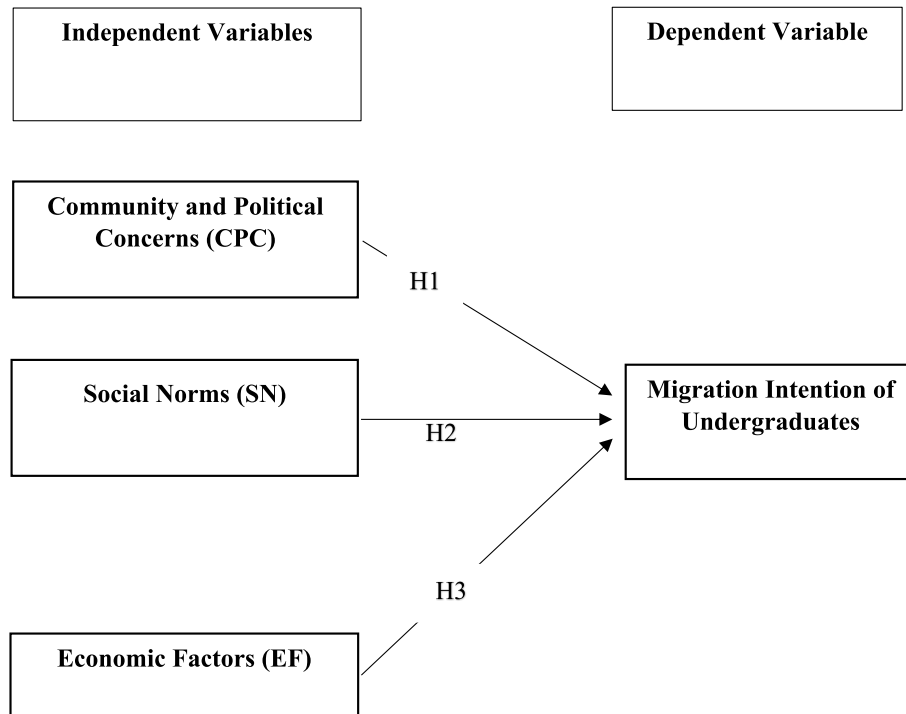


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.
Source: Authors' illustrations.

intentions to migrate are shaped predominantly by economic stressors, or whether political and normative influences exert independent effects. In this study, the researchers used Investigate theory and Theory as frequently used in doctoral research to support the conceptual framework (Walden University LLC, 2023).

3. Methodology

This study was reviewed and approved by the authors' affiliated institution for the data collection process. To ensure rigour, researchers clearly define below how the sample was selected, how data were collected, and how statistical analysis was performed.

3.1. Sampling design

The target population for this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in both state and non-state universities in Sri Lanka, as listed on the University Grants Commission (UGC) website (22 state institutions and 25 non-state institutions). The most recent UGC statistics reported a total undergraduate population of 145,571 (National Human Resources Development Council of Sri Lanka, 2022). This figure was used as the population base for sample size determination.

A simple random sampling strategy was adopted to maximise representativeness and reduce bias (Horton et al., 2023). The sampling frame was constructed from university-provided student directories and contact lists obtained with institutional permission. Each student was assigned a numeric identifier, and the final sample was drawn using the MS Excel RANDBETWEEN function to generate random numbers corresponding to individuals in the population list. This ensured that every undergraduate had an equal and independent chance of being selected.

The sample size of 385 students was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, provides guidelines for minimum sample sizes required for populations over 100,000 to achieve a 95 % confidence level and a 5 % margin of error. This statistical justification improves the external validity of our findings.

3.2. Sample characteristics

Table 1 summarises the demographic and academic profiles of the final sample. Students represented diverse academic backgrounds (business, IT, engineering, humanities, agriculture, etc.), gender (49.9 % male, 50.1 % female), and geographic regions (all nine provinces). This amount of diversity reflects the heterogeneity of the national undergraduate population and supports the generalisability of the results.

3.3. Data collection

The selected students were invited to participate via their official university email addresses, with reminders distributed through faculty coordinators. To increase response rates, the survey link was also shared via institutional social media groups, but only students pre-identified in the random draw were included in the dataset. This clarification ensures that while social media improved accessibility, it did not compromise the randomisation process.

Data were collected through an online structured questionnaire administered between March–May 2023. Respondents gave informed consent prior to participation, were assured of confidentiality, and could withdraw at any stage. No compensation was provided.

3.4. Measures

The questionnaire was aligned with the study's conceptual framework and adapted from validated scales (Munasinghe, 2017; Weston & Gore, 2006). A 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was used to measure perceptions of community and political concerns, social norms, economic factors, and migration intention. Items were pilot-tested with 20 undergraduates to confirm face validity before full deployment.

3.5. Data analysis

Data were analysed using structural equation modeling. Initially,

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
16–20	2	0.5 %
21–24	294	76.3 %
25–29	89	23.2 %
Above 30	0	0 %
Gender		
Male	192	49.9 %
Female	193	50.1 %
Field of Study		
Business	96	25 %
Information Technology	112	29 %
Engineering	65	17 %
Humanities & Social Science	19	5 %
Arts	19	5 %
Architecture	12	3 %
Hospitality	4	1 %
Law	0	0 %
Education	0	0 %
Agriculture	35	9 %
Other	23	6 %
Province		
Western Province	142	36.8 %
Central Province	39	10.1 %
Eastern Province	26	6.7 %
Southern Province	54	14.1 %
Northern Province	24	6.2 %
Northwestern Province	27	6.9 %
North Central Province	15	4 %
Uva Province	27	6.9 %
Sabaragamuwa Province	32	8.4 %
Current Employment Status		
Employed	124	32.3 %
Unemployed	261	67.7 %
Migration Intention		
Yes	366	95.1 %
No	19	4.9 %
Satisfaction Level as an Undergraduate to stay in Sri Lanka		
Yes	6	1.5 %
No	218	56.5 %
Maybe	130	33.8 %
Don't Know	31	8.1 %
Current Status		
I'm already migrated	0	0 %
I'm planning to migrate	291	75.6 %
Already started preparations to migrate	79	20.5 %
I'm not migrating	14	3.7 %
Reason for Migrating		
Financial issues due to current economic crisis in SL	201	52.3 %
Poor political leadership of SL	134	34.9 %
Social concerns in SL	49	12.8 %
Countries Trying to Migrate		
Australia	46	12 %
New Zealand	85	22 %
UK	50	13 %
European Union countries	27	7 %
Canada	46	12 %
USA	42	11 %
Middle East	15	4 %
Japan	15	4 %
Russia	42	11 %
Other	15	4 %
Type of Visa		
Student Visa	190	49.5 %
Skilled Migration Visa	61	15.9 %
Visa Sponsored Job	112	29 %
Other	22	5.6 %
Return to Home Country		
Yes	103	26.7 %
No	73	19 %
It depends how I feel in the new country	209	54.4 %

Source: Authors Compilation based on Survey Data

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) to address the main objective of the study. Subsequently, PLS-SEM was employed for further data analysis. Smart PLS 4.0.9.5, a user-friendly and freely available software, was utilised for PLS-SEM due to its simplicity and effectiveness in evaluating structural equation modeling (SEM). Given the specific requirements of the research and the capabilities of Smart PLS in comparison to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), it was deemed more suitable for this study. Smart PLS is often preferred over SPSS in research involving SEM techniques due to its enhanced ability to evaluate and understand structural relationships (Puteh & Azman Ong, 2017). This choice confirmed the appropriateness of SEM as the data analysis tool for the current study.

Research approach steps can be easily identified using the following diagram (see Fig. 2).

4. Results

To provide a coherent scientific narrative, the results are presented in three stages: (i) descriptive findings, (ii) measurement model evaluation, and (iii) structural model testing of Hypothesis 1–3 (H1–H3). Each table is introduced with context and followed by interpretation.

4.1. Descriptive findings

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables among the 385 participants. The mean scores and standard deviations indicate the central tendency and variability of each item. For instance, the item CPC5 (Community and Political Concerns) has a mean score of 3.909 and a standard deviation of 0.909, indicating a relatively high level of concern. Similarly, SN6 (Social Norms) has the highest mean score of 4.094 but also a larger standard deviation of 1.104, suggesting variability in responses. The highest mean score for Migration Intention (MI) is observed in MI6 (3.958), with the lowest standard deviation in MI9 (0.995).

Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest that respondents report moderate-to-high concerns about community/political conditions, elevated economic pressures, and generally high migration intentions. These descriptive results provide initial context that aligns with Sri Lanka's crisis period and motivate the subsequent model-based tests of H1–H3.

4.2. Measurement model (Confirmatory Factor Analysis)

Before testing hypotheses, we assessed the measurement model to ensure CPC, EF, SN, and MI were measured reliably and distinctly.

4.2.1. Outer loadings

Table 3 shows the outer loadings between observed items and their latent constructs. All indicators load ≥ 0.74 on their intended constructs, exceeding the conventional 0.70 threshold. This confirms indicator reliability and supports convergent validity.

4.2.2. Construct reliability and convergent validity

Table 4 summarises Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs demonstrate high internal consistency (α and CR > 0.80) and adequate convergent validity (AVE > 0.50). These results indicate that all constructs are reliable and suitable for structural modelling.

4.2.3. Discriminant validity

Cross-loadings, Fornell–Larcker values, and HTMT ratios were examined to ensure distinctiveness among constructs. Each indicator loaded highest on its own construct, the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs, and all HTMT values were < 0.90 (Refer Tables 5–7). Together, these checks confirm

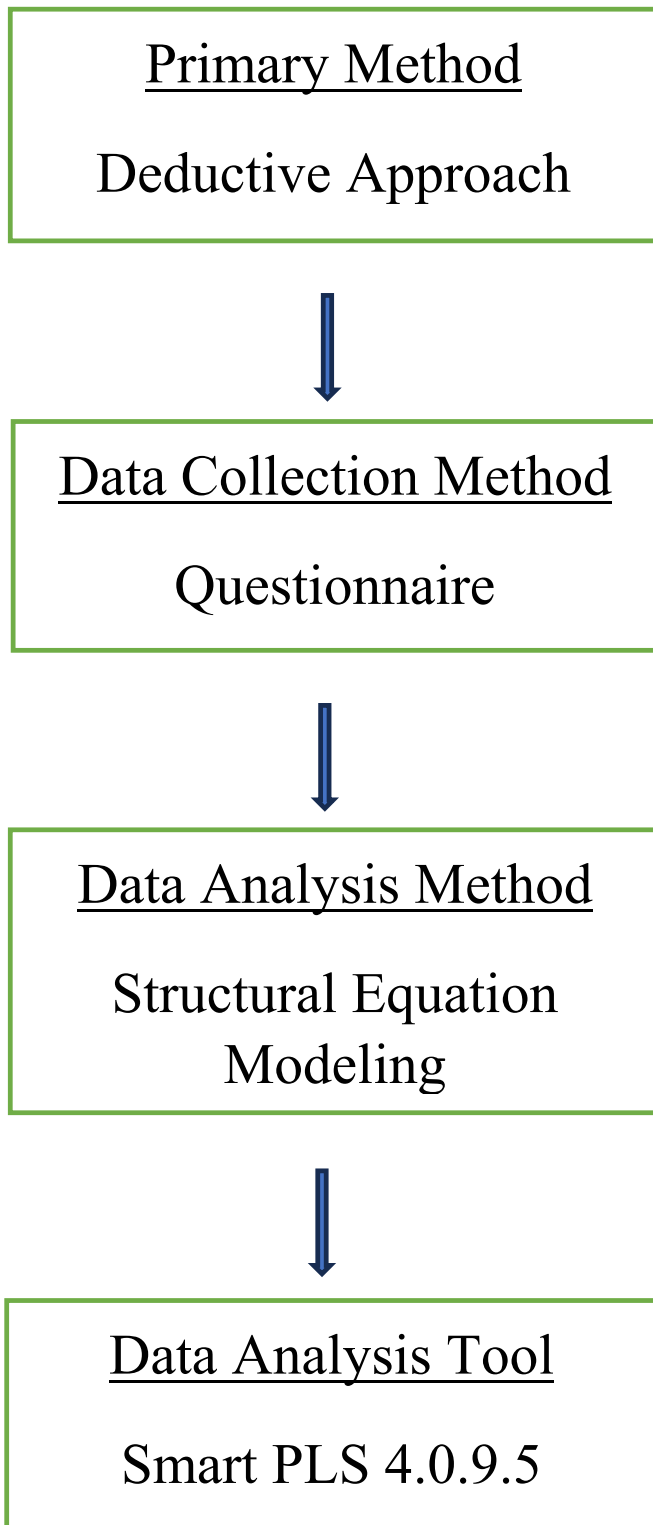


Fig. 2. Research approach.
Source: Authors' illustrations.

satisfactory discriminant validity.

4.3. Structural model results

The structural model was then tested to evaluate the hypothesised relationships (H1–H3). Bootstrapping with 500 subsamples was used to assess significance. Collinearity was not problematic (all VIF <3.3). The

Table 2
Descriptive findings.

Name	No.	Type	Mean	Standard deviation
CPC1	0	ORD	3.906	0.924
CPC2	1	ORD	3.831	0.94
CPC3	2	ORD	3.787	0.97
CPC4	3	ORD	3.751	1.05
CPC5	4	ORD	3.909	0.909
CPC6	5	ORD	3.873	0.845
SN1	6	ORD	4.06	0.988
SN2	7	ORD	4.075	0.946
SN3	8	ORD	3.891	0.905
SN4	9	ORD	3.753	0.945
SN5	10	ORD	3.878	1.104
SN6	11	ORD	4.094	0.976
EF1	12	ORD	3.844	1.12
EF2	13	ORD	3.906	1
EF3	14	ORD	3.831	0.975
EF4	15	ORD	3.779	1.022
EF5	16	ORD	3.917	0.963
EF6	17	ORD	3.818	0.911
MI1	18	ORD	3.992	0.963
MI2	19	ORD	3.574	1.081
MI3	20	ORD	3.618	1.051
MI4	21	ORD	3.468	1.059
MI5	22	ORD	3.732	0.95
MI6	23	ORD	3.958	1.006
MI7	24	ORD	3.686	0.916
MI8	25	ORD	3.899	0.995
MI9	26	ORD	3.699	1.092

The abbreviations mentioned in all the tables are stands: CPC – Community and Political Concerns, SN – Social Norms, EF – Economic Factors, MI – Migration Intention.

Source: Generated by the authors using Smart PLS software.

Table 3
Outer loadings.

Observed Variable < -Latent Construct	Outer Loading
CPC1 <- CPC	0.876
CPC2 <- CPC	0.849
CPC3 <- CPC	0.813
CPC4 <- CPC	0.745
CPC5 <- CPC	0.761
CPC6 <- CPC	0.805
EF1 <- EF	0.867
EF2 <- EF	0.861
EF3 <- EF	0.904
EF4 <- EF	0.873
EF5 <- EF	0.872
EF6 <- EF	0.922
MI1 <- MI	0.781
MI2 <- MI	0.771
MI3 <- MI	0.763
MI4 <- MI	0.752
MI5 <- MI	0.804
MI6 <- MI	0.842
MI7 <- MI	0.845
MI8 <- MI	0.789
MI9 <- MI	0.776
SN1 <- SN	0.906
SN2 <- SN	0.917
SN3 <- SN	0.922
SN4 <- SN	0.895
SN5 <- SN	0.857
SN6 <- SN	0.912

Source: Generated by the authors using Smart PLS software.

model explained a substantial proportion of variance in migration intention ($R^2 = 0.794$) with positive predictive relevance ($Q^2 > 0$).

4.3.1. Path coefficients

The path coefficients in Table 8 show the direct effects of the three predictors on migration intention.

Table 4
Construct reliability and validity.

Latent Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CPC	0.895	0.909	0.656
EF	0.944	0.946	0.781
MI	0.925	0.927	0.627
SN	0.954	0.955	0.813

Source: Generated by the authors using Smart PLS software.

Table 5
Cross loading statistics.

	CPC	EF	MI	SN
CPC1	0.876	0.672	0.740	0.694
CPC2	0.849	0.580	0.658	0.559
CPC3	0.813	0.539	0.615	0.578
CPC4	0.745	0.552	0.502	0.612
CPC5	0.761	0.503	0.477	0.603
CPC6	0.805	0.595	0.559	0.654
EF1	0.632	0.867	0.784	0.774
EF2	0.656	0.861	0.887	0.838
EF3	0.582	0.904	0.743	0.829
EF4	0.612	0.873	0.759	0.744
EF5	0.624	0.872	0.809	0.835
EF6	0.666	0.922	0.830	0.818
MI1	0.671	0.761	0.781	0.711
MI2	0.578	0.740	0.771	0.708
MI3	0.542	0.646	0.763	0.570
MI4	0.533	0.692	0.752	0.587
MI5	0.570	0.767	0.804	0.746
MI6	0.586	0.709	0.842	0.653
MI7	0.599	0.699	0.845	0.612
MI8	0.568	0.645	0.789	0.589
MI9	0.642	0.550	0.776	0.526
SN1	0.709	0.809	0.736	0.906
SN2	0.742	0.837	0.713	0.917
SN3	0.707	0.804	0.739	0.922
SN4	0.640	0.821	0.693	0.895
SN5	0.645	0.790	0.712	0.857
SN6	0.663	0.870	0.765	0.912

Source: Generated by the authors using Smart PLS software.

Table 6
Fornell-Larcker criterion values for the model.

	CPC	ECC	MI	SN
Community and political concerns	0.810			
Economic Factors	0.712	0.884		
Migration Intention	0.743	0.792	0.873	
Social Norms	0.759	0.806	0.792	0.912

Source: Generated by the authors using Smart PLS software.

Table 7
HTMT ratio for the structural model.

	CPC	ECC	MI	SN
Community and political concerns				
Economic Factors	0.771			
Migration Intention	0.802	0.725		
Social Norms	0.824	0.704	0.851	

H1 is supported: Community and political concerns significantly increase migration intention ($\beta = 0.273$).

H2 is weakly supported: Social norms exert a small but significant effect ($\beta = -0.117$). The negative sign reflects item coding and does not alter the conclusion that SN contributes uniquely to migration intention.

H3 is strongly supported: Economic factors are the dominant predictor ($\beta = 0.786$).

Table 8
Path coefficients.

Latent Construct - > Observed Variable	Path Coefficient
CPC - > MI	0.273
EF - > MI	0.786
SN - > MI	-0.117

Source: Generated by the authors using Smart PLS software

Table 9
Path coefficients (Bootstrapping).

	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values
CPC- > MI	0.032	8.652	0.000
EF- > MI	0.054	14.532	0.000
SN- > MI	0.054	2.168	0.030

Source: Generated by the authors using Smart PLS software.

These results indicate that economic pressures outweigh political concerns and social expectations in shaping undergraduates' migration intentions.

4.3.2. Bootstrapped significance tests

The researchers examined the survey's structural model using the bootstrapping method to determine the significance of the links between the latent variables. The associations between the three variables (Community and Political Concerns, Economic Factors, and Social Norms) and Migration Intention were determined using bootstrapping with 500 sub-samples and a significance level of 0.05. The results are shown in Table 9 as t-statistics and p-values. If the t-statistic is greater than 1.96 and the p-value is less than 0.05, the associations are considered significant. In addition to t- and p-values, we report 95 % bias-corrected confidence intervals and f^2 effect sizes to indicate precision and practical impact of each path.

The results confirm that there is a strong correlation between community and political issues and migration intention ($t = 8.652, p < 0.005$). Economic considerations also have a significant positive impact on migration intention ($t = 14.534, p < 0.000$). The association between social norms and migration intention is weak but significant ($t = 2.168, p < 0.030$). Overall, significant correlations can be seen between the independent and dependent factors.

4.4. Structural model diagram

Fig. 3 illustrates the final structural model with standardised path coefficients and explained variance (R^2) for migration intention. The diagram visually reinforces the findings: economic factors exert the strongest influence, political concerns remain important, and social norms have a weaker but statistically significant role.

Overall, the results form a consistent narrative. Descriptive statistics revealed high migration intentions alongside concerns about political stability and economic hardship. Measurement tests confirmed robust and valid constructs. Structural modelling demonstrated that economic factors are the primary driver of migration intentions, political concerns exert additional influence, and social norms have a smaller but significant effect. These findings provide direct support for H1-H3 and highlight the relative strength of each pathway.

5. Discussion and implications

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that significantly influence undergraduates' intentions to migrate from Sri Lanka. The findings demonstrate that community and political concerns, economic factors, and social norms all exert significant effects, although the relative strength of these influences differs.

Concerning H1, community and political concerns were found to

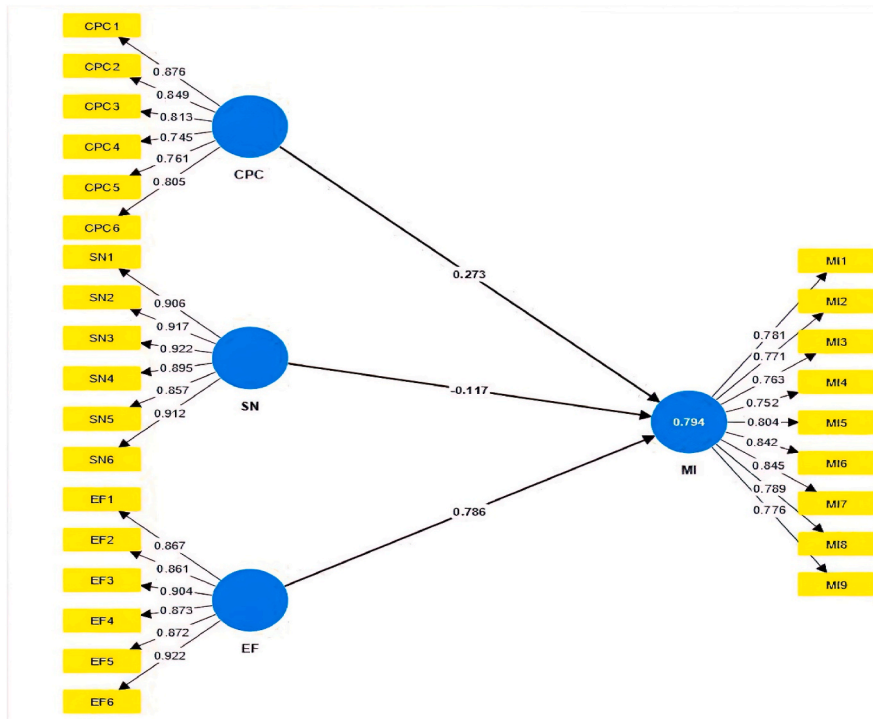


Fig. 3. Structural model of the analysis.

Note: the figure annotates path coefficients with significance markers (e.g., $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.001$) and reports R^2 for Migration Intension.

Source: Authors generated through Smart PLS

have a positive and moderate impact on migration intention. This result is consistent with prior studies highlighting the role of political instability and governance in shaping migration decisions. For instance, Wijesinghe and Jayawardane (2021) reported that political influence and corruption were key drivers of engineer migration, while Blazhevskva (2017) identified insecurity, corruption, unemployment, and political instability as major push factors. Our findings extend these results by showing that such concerns strongly affect undergraduates as well, not only skilled professionals.

H2 tested the effect of social norms, which, although weaker, still showed a significant relationship with migration intention. This suggests that cultural expectations and peer influences remain relevant but are less decisive than economic or political conditions. Previous studies, such as Gödri and Feleky (2017), emphasised the role of perceived social expectations in youth migration decisions, while Dissanayake and Samarakoon (2021) noted that migration serves as a household strategy for improving living standards. Similarly, Ali (2007) argued that social pressures may encourage migration even when economic opportunities exist at home. Our findings nuance these studies by showing that, in Sri Lanka's current crisis, social norms contribute modestly but do not override stronger economic and political drivers.

Finally, H3 confirmed that economic factors are the strongest determinant of migration intention. High unemployment, inflation, and declining living standards are central to students' decisions to seek opportunities abroad. Senanayake (2022), found that rising costs of living, fuel and medicine shortages, and inflation are fuelling migration desires, while De Alwis (2022) also highlighted economic pressures as a significant influence. Evidence from other regions, such as Redlin (2022) in Middle East and North African (MENA) countries and Rasamoelison et al. (2021) in developing economies, further supports the idea that macroeconomic decline drives outward mobility. Our study adds to this body of work by quantifying the dominant role of economic stressors on Sri Lankan undergraduates during the combined economic and political crisis.

These results also align with other Sri Lankan research on

professional migration. For example, Wijesinghe and Jayawardane (2021) showed that young engineers migrated due to a mix of economic, political, and social reasons, and Wijesooriya (2017) found that Sri Lankans moved to South Korea in search of higher-paying jobs despite local shortages. Our findings confirm that the same mix of push factors applies to undergraduates, but with economic drivers now amplified by the post-pandemic crisis.

Policy and practice implications follow directly from these findings. First, to reduce politically driven migration, policymakers should strengthen governance, transparency, and inclusivity in higher education and public institutions. Second, economic reforms are crucial to create jobs, stabilise prices, and restore confidence among young people. Incentives for private-sector higher education investment—such as establishing local branches of international universities (e.g., Curtin Malaysia, Monash Malaysia)—could widen opportunities and lessen outbound mobility. Additionally, modernising curricula and investing in employability skills would improve graduates' labour market outcomes, making domestic opportunities more attractive. Finally, coordinated action between government, professional bodies, and industry can help retain specialised knowledge and skills while creating an environment that weakens the appeal of migration.

The strengths of this study lie in its focus on undergraduates, a group often overlooked in Sri Lankan migration research. By empirically testing political, social, and economic factors together, the study provides a comprehensive view of student migration intentions. The results validate and extend earlier findings, offering evidence-based insights for targeted policy interventions.

In summary, the findings confirm that political, social, and economic factors all shape undergraduates' migration intentions, but their influence is not equal. Economic drivers dominate, political instability adds further pressure, and social norms play a secondary role. This balanced perspective both supports and extends prior research, contributing new insights into the dynamics of undergraduate migration during a period of national crisis.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several important limitations, and these should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although a random sampling method was employed, the study focused exclusively on undergraduates enrolled in recognised universities. This focus may limit the generalisability of the results to other groups such as graduates, vocational students, or young professionals, whose migration motivations could be vital and differ in many ways. Second, the research adopted a purely quantitative design using SEM. While this approach enabled rigorous statistical testing, it did not capture the underlying motivations and subjective experiences of participants, potentially constraining the depth of interpretation. A qualitative or mixed-methods approach in future work could generate richer insights into how political, social, and economic factors interact to shape migration intentions. Third, the study was conducted during a period of severe economic turmoil and political crisis in Sri Lanka. This unique context may have amplified the salience of economic hardship and political instability, suggesting that the relative balance between different drivers could shift under more stable conditions. Finally, the analyses were conducted using Smart PLS 4.0.9.5, which is well suited for SEM but limited in scope. Future studies could incorporate robustness checks using alternative modelling approaches, such as covariance-based SEM, to validate the findings and strengthen methodological rigor.

Recognising these limitations helps to situate the contributions of the current study appropriately. For example, the strong emphasis placed on economic drivers may partly reflect both the undergraduate-only sample and the crisis context in which the study was conducted. To build on these findings, future research should extend the sample to include other youth groups, employ qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups, and conduct cross-national comparisons in developing-country contexts. Such work would enhance the generalisability, depth, and explanatory power of research on migration intentions. Socio-economic diversity among university students in Sri Lanka varies considerably across universities in terms of state and non-state universities and urban universities and rural universities. Although the sample was selected randomly, potential response biases may still exist. For instance, undergraduates from urban universities may exhibit different migration intentions and influencing factors compared to those from rural universities. Therefore, future researchers in Sri Lanka should consider this fact and extend their studies to explore these differences.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how community and political concerns, social norms, and economic factors influence Sri Lankan undergraduates' migration intentions during an unprecedented economic and political crisis. The findings highlight the dominant role of economic stressors, the compounding effect of political instability, and the secondary but significant influence of social norms. The study contributes to migration research by extending prior labour-focused analyses to undergraduates, providing evidence-based insights for policy and practice. Importantly, the results suggest that unless political governance and economic opportunities improve, undergraduates will continue to seek education and employment abroad, intensifying the risk of brain drain. By identifying the strongest drivers of migration, this research offers actionable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and industry stakeholders to design strategies that enhance youth retention and national development.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Rusini Marawila: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ranitha Weeraratna:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation. **Nilmini Rathnayake:** Writing – review &

editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation. **Rashini Guruge:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Biyoni Wehella:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tharindi Udughapattuwa:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mano Weligodapola:** Writing – review & editing.

Availability of data and materials

Data and materials are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from Ethics Review Committee of SLIIT Business School (reference number; SLIIT/ERC/SBS/2023/10) on 14/08/2023.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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