

Fantasies of Sri Lankan Undergraduates in Humanities and Social Sciences Disciplines about Their 'Future Living Geo-spaces': A Study Based at the University of Ruhuna

Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
Volume 6 Issue 1, February 2026: 01-11
ISSN: 2773 692X (Online), 2773 6911 (Print)
Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s)
Published by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
Website: <https://www.sab.ac.lk/sljssh>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljssh.v6i1.137>



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Received: 19 July 2025, **Revised:** 11 October 2025, **Accepted:** 13 February 2026.

How to Cite this Article: Kumara, H.I.G.C. (2026). Fantasies of Sri Lankan undergraduates in humanities and social sciences disciplines about their 'future living geo-spaces': A study based at the university of Ruhuna. *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(1), 1-11.

Abstract

In behavioural geography, a distinction exists between the physical geographic space in which people live and the fantasy geographic space in which they mentally aspire to live. The main objective of this study was to analyse the fantasies of Sri Lankan undergraduates in the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines regarding their 'future living geo-spaces,' using the University of Ruhuna as the research context. A qualitatively dominant mixed research methodology and an inductive research approach were employed. To collect quantitative primary data, a short questionnaire was given to students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, selected through a simple random sampling method. Qualitative primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with students and individuals who had already migrated to foreign countries, selected using a purposive sampling method. A qualitative explanatory analysis method was used for data interpretation and analysis. The key finding of this study is that the future fantasy living spaces of students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences are predominantly oriented toward capitalist countries. Among those countries, the most prominent are those dominated by Anglo-Saxons and where English is spoken as the primary language. This situation can be interpreted through the theoretical lenses of core-peripheral dependency and the concepts of autonomy and hegemony. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that this fantasy pattern is deeply aligned with the theoretical frameworks of behavioural geography. These insights are important for informing public policy formulation and decision-making processes in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Behavioural Geography, Fantasy Living Geo-Space, Geo-Space, Undergraduates in Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna

INTRODUCTION

The concept of space has long been central to geographical thought, serving as a foundation for understanding how human beings interact with their environments (Holloway & Hubbard, 2014). In the realm of geographical philosophy, two distinct yet interwoven notions of living space emerge; the real geographical living space and the fantasy living space. The former pertains to the material, physical spaces that humans inhabit cities, rural landscapes, and homes, shaped by geographical, political, and socio-economic factors (Harvey, 1973; Sudradjat, 2012). The latter refers to imagined, idealised, or virtual spaces that individuals and societies conceive as aspirational, utopian, or symbolic realms, influenced by cultural narratives, media, and personal desires (Lefebvre, 1991). These two dimensions of space highlight the interplay between objective spatial realities and subjective human experiences, a theme deeply embedded in philosophical and humanistic geography.

The concept of extra-geographical living space is rooted in the tangible, measurable world, where choices and communities construct their habitats and shape landscapes through economic activity, political structures, and cultural transmission (Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1991). This space is bound by physical constraints such as topography, climate, and infrastructure, making it a place of material existence and presence (Lewis, 2023; Soja, 1980; Walmsley & Lewis, 2014). In a nutshell, the Industrial Revolution redefined living spaces by transforming rural settlements into urban metropolises, changing both human experiences of space and the fabric of built environments (Smith, 1984). Thus, the real geographical living space is a constantly evolving creation shaped by natural and man-made factors.

The notion of imaginary living spaces, or "fantasised living spaces," on the other hand, maintains the limitations of ma-

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terial reality while acting as a symbolic or aspirational depiction of the ideal human life (Street & Coleman, 2012; Sudradjat, 2012). This notion has strong philosophical roots, especially in the writings of philosophers like (Bachelard, 1964), who studied how our imagination affects how we perceive space. Literature, mythology, and modern digital environments all contain examples of imaginary living spaces that provide people with respite from the constricting circumstances of their actual living quarters. Thomas More first proposed the idea of utopia in 1516. People often imagine a different living environment that differs from their actual living environment and social circumstances (Paniotova, 2016). This is explained by the human brain's propensity to enter a new living space and transcend the line separating the para-imaginary (fantasy) world from the real world (Graham, 1998; Van de Mosselaer & Gualeni, 2022).

People are currently attracted to the urban imaginary living space, which is built on the capitalist dream world, modern cultural symbols, and digital technology, which is creating fantasies of better living in space. Cities function both as tangible habitats and as imagined landscapes, reflecting aspirations for success and beauty (Jacobs, 1961; Lefebvre, 1991) highlights that the 'space of human desire' is socially constructed, with human behaviour shaped by capitalist forces that commodify both real and imagined spaces (Collins, 2020; Davis, 1990; Harvey, 2006). The digital age has introduced metaverses and virtual environments, where users engage with imaginary geographies (Castells, 1996). This era has expanded human aspirations for space, linking them to various geographical regions and fostering a greater willingness to migrate (McAuliffe, 2021).

The tension between physical and imagined living spaces raises fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of human existence and spatial experience. Are imagined spaces mere illusions, or do they have tangible effects on real-world behaviour and social structures? On what basis are these fantasised geographical spaces constructed in the human mind? What are the geopolitical, economic, psychological, and sociological foundations behind the human desire for imaginary living spaces? These questions primarily fall within the domain of behavioural human geography (Czaika et al., 2021).

Sri Lanka, an island situated in the tropical region, politically and economically belongs to the periphery of the periphery according to the core-periphery dependency theory (Morales Ruvalcaba, 2023). Presently, the country grapples with various economic and political challenges (DeVotta, 2022). Human fantasy can be defined as 'a pleasant situation that individuals enjoy contemplating but is improbable to occur,' or 'the activity of envisioning such scenarios,' while 'human fantasy in storytelling merges real-world settings with imaginative elements, focusing on human emotions, relationships, and personal growth' (Wahlen et al., 2011). Discrepancies often exist between the 'real geographical living space' of people inhabiting and their 'fantasy living space.' This situation is particularly unique in a periphery-of-peripheral country, facing political and economic crises. A comprehensive analytical study on the fantasies of Sri Lankan undergraduates in humanities and social sciences disciplines concerning their 'Future Living Geo-spaces' has not yet been conducted. This study aims to fulfil this knowledge gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of Behavioural Geography: Human Desire for Living Space and Migration

Theories of behavioural geography provide the philosophical foundation for understanding how human emotions and social constructs influence migration decisions. Unlike classical economic migration theories, which emphasise rational decision-making based on push and pull factors, behavioural geography focuses on individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations of space (Lewis, 2023). It strongly challenges the deterministic view that human migration is driven solely by economic necessity. Instead, it argues that migration decisions are shaped by individuals' perceptions of potential destinations, personal aspirations, and social networks. Cognitive mapping, mental and emotional images of fantasised geographical spaces, and place attachment play a crucial role in shaping migration patterns (Castells, 1996; Lewis, 2023). Thus, as analysed by behavioural geographers, the desire to change one's living space is determined not only by economic or political conditions but also by psychological, cultural, and social factors.

'Place Perception Theory' and Human Living Space

Place Perception Theory is a key concept in behavioural geography that explores how people subjectively perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with living geo-spaces (Tuan, 1977/2001). Unlike traditional geographical theories that assume a subjective understanding of space, Place Perception Theory mainly emphasises that individuals experience and evaluate places based on personal, cultural, and social influences. Tuan (1977/2001) introduced the concept of *topophilia*, associated with Place Perception Theory, which describes the emotional attachments of people to their living places and space (Tuan, 1977/2001). Human perceptions of places are very subjective and individualised, and human attachment to places is influenced by memories, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. In a similar vein, (Relph, 1976/2020) maintained that identity and entitlement are greatly influenced by one's sense of place. This theory holds that an individual's perception of their living space evolves and depends on their unique situation (Relph, 1976/2020).

Place perception theory is important in the field of migration studies because it explains how migrants form expectations about the countries they intend to migrate to. Media representations, social networks, and past experiences all influence how people perceive foreign external locations; these factors can sometimes lead to irrational expectations, and migrants must cope with culture shock when they move (Cresswell, 2004). All things considered, this theory explains how people's attachment to their home is a subjective attachment that goes beyond economic and political ties and how it changes and transforms depending on a number of factors. This theory has significant implications for the study of human mobility and interactions with geographic spaces.

Place Attachment and Place Identity

Place attachment, place identity, and key concepts in environmental psychology explain how people form mental and emotional connections with particular locations (Peng et al., 2020). Place attachment is the deep emotional connection that people develop with specific places as a result of memories, social interactions, and individual experiences

(Scannell & Gifford, 2010). This "uniquely specific familiar place" is the most suitable and comfortable place for the individuals in question to live (Peng et al., 2020).

The concept of place identity, first proposed by Proshansky et al. (1983), characterises the ways in which an individual's thoughts and perceptions are impacted. Cultural and social factors shape place identities, which are dynamic. Social, historical, and cultural elements influence place identity. Just as geospatial locations change according to human thoughts, human thoughts are also shaped by place identity, and people maintain mental and emotional attachments with those places. Accordingly, migration is not just a movement from one place to another. It is a displacement from a specific place where one's thinking is formed and bound, to a geographical space where there is no such binding (Peng et al., 2020). So why do people create fantasies to migrate? There are several theories that explain why people choose to move to a new geographical area, leaving behind a familiar living place to which they are deeply emotionally attached. Among those theories, 'Mental Maps and Perception Theory', 'Behavioural Decision-Making Theory', 'Prospect-Refuge Theory', 'Life-Course Migration Theory' and 'Cumulative Causation & Social Influence' are mainly important to explain the above situation.

'Beyond the Comfort Geographical Zone': Theories of Human Behaviour and Attraction to New Spaces

Mental Maps and Perception Theory

Mental maps and cognitive theory analyse how individuals mentally process and perceive their living environment or their imagined living environment. This theory explains how people create mental maps of their surroundings, which are subjective and dynamic in nature, influencing decision-making and spatial understanding related to navigation (Gould & White, 2005; Lynch, 1964). Related to this theory, cognitive mapping, a concept introduced by (Lynch, 1964), plays a crucial role in place perception. According to Lynch, individuals construct mental maps of their environment based on landmarks, routes, and regions that shape their spatial behaviour and navigation. These mental maps are highly subjective and can vary significantly between individuals due to personal experiences, social contexts, and media influence (Lynch, 1964).

Behavioural Decision-Making Theory

Behavioural decision-making theory mainly focuses on analysing how psychological factors influence the migration decisions of human beings (Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015). This theory basically critiques the traditional economic theories that analyse people's migration based only on economic factors (Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015; Kahneman, 2011). A fundamental feature of this behavioural decision-making theory is that, in addition to economic factors, psychological factors also have a major impact on changing the familiar living space of the people (Kahneman, 2011). According to behavioural decision-making theory, individuals make migration decisions based on psychological factors, including social influences that cause them to change their emotions and mental states. Rather than the question of 'how comfortable the familiar geographical space' in which people live is, the analysis here examines 'how much social influences' add to the psychological motivation for migration. In particular, recent studies based on this theory explain how individual migra-

tions occur based on psychological stimuli rather than as rational social phenomena (Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015). Also, the contexts that are constructed for migration needs and that appear to be 'reasonable and rational needs' are psychological factors that are constructed by social stimuli. This psychological behavioural study is important in studying why people change the familiar geographical space that represents them (Sonkar & Ram, 2024).

The Prospect-Refuge Theory

The future-refuge theory, developed by (Appleton, 1975), explains that humans, driven by evolutionary survival instincts, are naturally attracted to the environment. According to this theory, people are attracted to hypothetically safe environments that satisfy a basic human desire for both security and opportunity. In the context of human migration, individuals are attracted to new places where they can access economic, educational, or social opportunities, which also ensure safety and survival. Migrants evaluate potential destinations not only for practical benefits but also for psychological comfort and a sense of control over their surroundings (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004). This theory helps explain why people leave familiar places in search of safer and more comfortable environments.

The Life-Course Migration Theory

Elder Jr (1998) developed the life-course migration theory and basically explains that there is a relationship between the age of people and migration. Migration patterns change according to the age of the people. Especially during a young age, factors such as education, marriage, and employment are the main factors that drive migration. Most probably, young people believe that changing their living space helps them to make a new and better life. On the other hand, in old age, people migrate with the primary goal of living a better retirement life. Often, in old age, people migrate back to the familiar environment where they spent their childhood. Recent research by (Lulle, 2024) examined the factors that drive migration among middle-aged migrant women. It was clear that the monotonous life and economic distances, as well as the problems caused by gender, had led to changes in their living space. Bernard et al. (2014) found that age is a significant factor in studying migration patterns across countries. This has become an important theory in migration analysis, as it suggests that the nature of the decision to leave one's familiar environment varies with the age of the individuals concerned.

Cumulative Causation and Social Influence Theory

The Cumulative Inventions and Social Initiation theory was developed by (Myrdal, 1957). The theory explains that people who migrate make the decision not to migrate of their own volition. This is due to social influence. People are driven to migrate based on factors such as the conversations that occur among people in society, parental influence, the migration of friends, social opinion, and the migration trends of the time. According to this theory, when the social groups they represented have migrated collectively as a group, people resort to migration even without a specific reason and also people are driven to migrate, especially based on social conversations, parental influence, friends migrating, social opinion, and migration trends of the particular time (Korinek et al., 2025). This theory helps explain why people change familiar living geo-spaces to which they are emotionally attached.

Ideological Struggles: Autonomy, Hegemony, and Their Impact on Human Living Space and Migration

'Autonomy' is the ability of individuals or groups to make their own decisions and live according to their own values without external coercion or undue influence (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2022). Those who possess this dominant power also hold cultural and political dominance. 'Hegemony' refers to the dominance of one group or ideology over others, often exercised through cultural influence and ideas rather than direct force, shaping the way people think and behave (Mouffe, 2014). People living in geospatial areas without dominant power are psychologically drawn to the geographical spaces inhabited by those with dominant power (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2022; Mouffe, 2014).

Conversely, people who possess autonomic power tend to perceive their own geographical space as a socio-culturally, politically, and economically ideal and even fantasised place to live (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2022). What is particularly interesting is that when these individuals view their own geo-space as an 'ideal living space,' this perception, when seen from the perspective of dominant power, is also fantasised by those who are subject to that dominance (Scheel, 2019). As a result, people living under hegemonic influence begin to believe that their own geo-space is unsuitable for a better life, and that the geo-space inhabited by those with autocratic power is ideal. Consequently, they become emotionally motivated to migrate to these fantasised spaces, even though they are unfamiliar with them (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2022; Mouffe, 2014). This is a hegemonic situation. Particularly in the post-colonial era, people have been drawn to Western capitalist countries because of this dynamic between autonomy and hegemony. This hegemonic analysis can also serve as a critical framework in the study of human migration.

Core-Peripheral Dependency and Geospatial Fantasies

The Core-Peripheral Dependency theory builds on global inequalities to explain migration patterns. Rich, capitalist nations constitute the "core," while poorer nations form the "periphery" (Friedmann & Wayne, 1977; Lisimba, 2020). The core controls not only economic opportunities but also the political and cultural development of the periphery. Wallerstein (2004) emphasises that while the core thrives, the periphery stagnates, reinforcing global inequalities.

People in peripheral countries often view the core as a space of opportunity. This worldview fosters migration fantasies, especially among the educated, leading to "brain drain." Sheller (2018) argues that capitalist global flows define which spaces are viewed as desirable, prompting migration from high-barrier to high-opportunity regions. This cyclical migration reinforces dependency, draining human capital from the periphery and deepening development gaps.

Migration Fantasies Among the Sri Lankan Youth

Sri Lanka's position within the global periphery is reflected in its post-COVID economic crisis and the long-term effects of civil conflict (Brun, 2019; George et al., 2022; Sriskandarajah, 2002). Youth aged 18–29 are increasingly seeking opportunities abroad (Samarasinghe, 2022; Gunawardena & Yahampath, 2024). Australia is a major destination, with many Sri Lankans undertaking irregular migration (Rukshan & Manage, 2024). Migration desire varies by region and is shaped by education, gender, ethnicity, and social back-

ground (De Haas, 2020). Human trafficking linked to migration disrupts family structures and undermines social cohesion (Boyagoda & Senadhi, 2020).

Many migrants face a gap between the "fantasised better life" and the harsh realities abroad. Brain drain, in particular, drains Sri Lanka's educated population and weakens national development capacity. Understanding these fantasies is vital for public policy, especially in addressing root causes such as inequality, educational gaps, and political instability.

Escaping Potential: Brain Drain and Its Implications for Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's free education system represents a major state investment. When educated individuals migrate, this becomes a developmental loss (Kaluarachchi & Jayathilaka, 2024). Increasingly, young people treat education as a pathway to migration. Over 300,000 individuals left during the 2022 crisis alone (Nushara Ameer et al., 2024). This is not purely economic. Psychological and cultural drivers play a crucial role.

Migration of skilled professionals triggers chain reactions, causing others to follow (Kaluarachchi & Jayathilaka, 2024). Labour shortages now affect essential sectors like healthcare and education. The drain of skilled workers also deters foreign investment. Comprehensive policy reforms are necessary both to retain talent and to integrate the diaspora into national development. Without such measures, Sri Lanka's long-term socioeconomic stability remains at risk.

Knowledge Gap of Research

Although behavioural geography emphasises emotional and subjective ties to space (Tuan, 1977/2001), migration from familiar environments continues due to various psychological, economic, and ideological reasons (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2022; Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015; Kahneman, 2011). In Sri Lanka, brain drain is a pressing issue (Kaluarachchi & Jayathilaka, 2024) yet little research explores how undergraduate students in the humanities and social sciences imagine their "future living geo-spaces."

This study addresses that gap by focusing on undergraduates at the University of Ruhuna's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. It explores the following research objectives:

- To identify and describe the nature of the fantasised future living geo-spaces of Sri Lankan undergraduates in the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines.
- To analyse the fantasies of Sri Lankan undergraduates about their future living geo-spaces through relevant theoretical frameworks.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative dominant mixed methodology due to its focus on understanding students' fantasies about their future living spaces in relation to socio-cultural, economic, and political phenomena. This understanding is developed through comparisons of social experiences, norms, and philosophies, rather than through the analysis of numerical data. The approach emphasises 'words' over 'numbers,' aiming to address the 'what,' 'how,' and 'why' of social phenomena (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative research is considered more effective in comprehending, describing,

and interpreting social theories and structures, which aligns with the core components of this study (Mohajan, 2018).

The study is based on an inductive research approach combined with qualitative methodology. It begins by gathering data from both secondary and primary sources, and then links these findings to relevant theories, discourses, and concepts.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Data Collection and Sampling Method:

Three main methods were used in this study to collect primary data:

Short Questionnaire Survey – One hundred students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Ruhuna were selected using a random sampling method and given a short questionnaire. They were asked about their current living geo-space and its characteristics, as well as basic information regarding their fantasised future living geo-space and its nature.

In-depth Interviews Type 01 [IDIT-i]– From the group of students who participated in the questionnaire survey, twenty-one (21) were selected using a purposive sampling method for in-depth qualitative discussions. These discussions focused on their ideas about future living geo-spaces.

In-depth Interviews Type 02 [IDIT-ii] – Nine (09) individuals who completed their first degree in the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines at Sri Lankan state universities and are currently living abroad were selected through purposive sampling. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted via WhatsApp. These discussions initially focused on the gap between their fantasies of changing their living space and the reality they experienced.

Secondary Data: Relevant Research Papers and Books

According to the philosophical perspectives of human geography, the theoretical aspects that influence human life on Earth and its transformation are crucial in this study. In particular, information related to theories, discourses, and ideologies such as: “Place Perception Theory and Human Living Space, Place Attachment and Place Identity, Mental Maps and Perception Theory, Behavioral Decision-Making Theory, The Prospect-Refuge Theory, The Life-Course Migration Theory, Cumulative Causation & Social Influence Theory, Ideological Struggles: Autonomy, Hegemony, and Their Impact on Human Living Space and Migration, Core-Peripheral, Dependency and the Creation of Human Fantasies in Geospatial Migration” which influence human behavior and migration patterns, were gathered from relevant academic publications, books, and research journals.

Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative explanatory analysis is a research data analysis method used to explore and understand complex social phenomena by examining underlying causes, meanings, and patterns. This method deeply analyses the causes and patterns of human behaviour, both empirically and theoretically (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It is especially suited for studies where contextual understanding is essential and variables cannot be easily quantified. Researchers interpret data

inductively, identifying themes and relationships to construct explanations based on participants’ perspectives (Patton, 2014). It is widely used in the social sciences for theory development and for explaining the processes behind observable outcomes.

This study primarily focuses on qualitative data, and qualitative explanatory analysis was used as the main method for data analysis. Descriptive, simple statistical techniques were applied to analyse the quantitative data, which served as a supporting method to complement the qualitative findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study have been analysed based on the three research questions used for this study.

The Nature of Fantasised Future Living Geo-Spaces

According to the questionnaire survey conducted among a randomly selected group of one hundred students studying at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna, regarding the type of living space they would prefer after completing their degree, 86% of students have fantasised about changing their living geo-space and wish to migrate outside the country (a summary of the data is shown in Table 01). Although 14 students expressed a desire to remain in Sri Lanka, only one of them wishes to stay in the same geographical space in the future (Table 02). The remaining 13 students have fantasised about migrating from rural areas to semi-urban or urban geo-spaces within the country.

Table 01: Fantasies of Sri Lankan Undergraduates in Humanities and Social Sciences Disciplines about ‘Future Living Geo-spaces’: A Study Based at the University of Ruhuna.

	<i>The Nature of Fantasised Future Living Geo-Spaces: Country name</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
01	Do not like to migrate from Sri Lanka	14
02	Canada	13
03	UK	11
04	Australia	11
05	USA	10
06	New Zealand	06
07	Japan	05
08	Itali	05
09	Finland	04
10	German	04
11	South Korea	03
12	Norway	03
13	Switzerland	03
14	Sweden	02
15	Netherland	02
16	Singapore	01
17	French	01
18	Ireland	01
19	Denmark	01
	Total	100

Source: Short Questionnaire Survey of the Study, 2025.

The survey results reveal that 99 out of 100 respondents desire to change their current living space. This strongly reflects the influence of core-peripheral dependency theory in shaping these geo-spatial preferences (Friedmann & Wayne, 1977; Lisimba, 2020). Even among the graduates who do not

wish to leave the country, there is a clear preference for re-locating to the 'core' areas within Sri Lanka, highlighting the internal core-peripheral dynamics of the nation. Those who fantasise about changing their living geo-space beyond national borders have selected 18 countries out of the 195 in the world. Among these, Canada, the United Kingdom, the

United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand are the most preferred destinations. Notably, like these major countries, all the others selected are also developed capitalist states. This raises a significant question: How can this situation be analysed?

Table 02: Fantasised Future Living Geo-Space of the Students who do not want to Migrate from the Country.

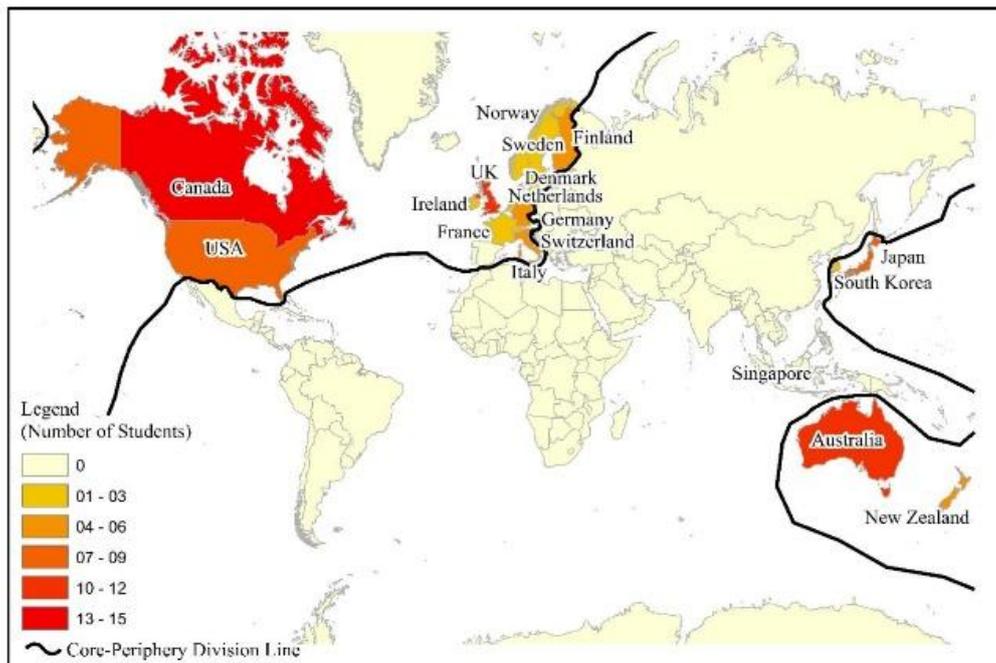
	Currently living geo-space of the students who do not like to migrate outside of Sri Lanka	Fantasised future living geo-space of Sri Lanka
01	Rural	Same place
02	Rural	Urban
03	Rural	Urban
04	Semi-urban	Urban
05	Rural	Semi- urban
06	Semi-urban	Urban
07	Semi-urban	Urban
08	Rural	Urban
09	Rural	Urban
10	Semi-urban	Urban
11	Rural	Semi-urban
12	Rural	Urban
12	Rural	Urban
14	Semi-urban	Urban

Source: Short Questionnaire Survey of the Study, 2025.

The free education system in Sri Lanka serves as the primary means of social mobility for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Batatota, 2023). It has enabled the rural poor to ascend into the upper or lower middle classes. Although students particularly those in rural areas face limited access to education in disciplines such as science and mathematics, they do have relatively greater access to faculties of humanities and social sciences. Students entering

these faculties primarily view higher education as a pathway to transcend their socio-economic status, rather than as a means to obtain high-quality education. Their aspirations are rooted in transitioning to a capitalist, consumer-oriented lifestyle. Consequently, their visions of ideal living spaces are linked to geographical locations where such a lifestyle is attainable (Batatota, 2023). Achieving this necessitates escaping the rural, peripheral geographical spaces with which they are familiar.

Figure 01: Fantasies of Countries of the Sri Lankan Undergraduates in Humanities and Social Sciences Disciplines about 'Future Living Geo-spaces'.



[The core countries lie to the north and east of the core-periphery dividing line, while the peripheral countries lie to the south and west.]

Source: Prepared Based on the Short Questionnaire Survey, 2025.

"My village is in Karapitiya, Godakanda (a semi-urban area). Many people from our area have migrated abroad. I too have dreamed of going abroad since childhood. After completing my degree, my main aspiration is to go to England. Alternatively, I would consider going to Canada, New Zealand, or any other English-speaking country. I believe those are the best countries" (IDIT-i-01: Male student, 24 years old, from a semi-urban area, 2025.01.20)

The countries primarily selected by students in the humanities and social sciences are specific and consistent. According to the theory of Core -Peripheral Dependency, all five of these countries are capitalist nations dominated by Anglo-Saxon autonomy (Friedmann & Wayne, 1977; Lisimba, 2020). From the perspective of world-systems theory and the core-periphery model, the United States and the United Kingdom can be identified as "core-of-the-core" countries. When evaluated through both political power and development indicators, these countries are regarded as global leaders possessing substantial political autonomy (Friedmann & Wayne, 1977).

Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, while not at the core's centre, are wealthy and supportive peripheral states that are closely aligned with the core nations mentioned above. In contrast, Sri Lanka is situated at the periphery of the periphery. It can also be argued that, due to its colonial history under British rule, Sri Lanka has, perhaps unconsciously, internalised the authority of capitalist economic systems and Anglo-Saxon hegemony through both colonial and postcolonial influences (Wallerstein, 2004). Accordingly, it can be interpreted that Sri Lankan students pursuing studies in the fields of humanities and social sciences who aim to transcend class boundaries through education tend to mentally detach from their lived geographical realities. Instead, they are increasingly drawn toward the aspiration of migrating to countries characterised by Anglo-Saxon dominance (Sheller, 2018).

"I was born in a rural area in the dry zone of Sri Lanka. Our family's main source of income was paddy farming. But due to various problems, we are poor like all the farmers in our province. After completing my degree, they would go back to the village and show me something to do. My dream is to become a teacher in a government school. I have no intention of leaving Sri Lanka. But to start the life I want, I will have to change my residence to a city or an area close to a city. I especially like a semi-urban life" (IDIT-i-08: Female student, 24 years old, from Dry zone, Rural area, 2025.01.20).

In addition to the Anglo-Saxon countries, the Scandinavian nations are among the most attractive destinations for students. These countries are renowned for their emphasis on freedom, democracy, high standards of living, and robust welfare systems.

"After completing my degree, I would like to go abroad. Based on what I have heard, countries such as Norway offer a high quality of life and uphold gender equality and individual freedoms, making them appealing places to live" (IDIT-i-03: Female student, 24 years old, from wet zone, Rural area, 2025.01.20).

Fourteen out of the one hundred individuals in the sample indicated that they had no intention of leaving Sri Lanka. This decision stems from the fact that, although they concede the need to change their familiar geographical environment, they prefer to remain within the country due to the strength of their existing cultural and social networks.

"Many of my friends want to migrate to a developed country to secure a good job. However, my parents are elderly, and I am the only one who can take care of them. That is why I want to stay in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, I do not wish to return to my village after graduation. I would prefer to leave the rural area and seek employment in an urban setting" (IDIT-i-06: Female student, 25 years old, from the Dry Zone, rural area; interview conducted on 2025.01.19).

Geo-spatial Imaginaries: Understanding Aspirational Migration Through Theoretical Lenses.

This section aims to analyse, through the lens of human geographic theories, the factors that influence Sri Lankan students pursuing degrees in Humanities and Social Sciences to identify the geospatial areas in which they aspire to live in the future. Classical geographers such as Tuan and Relph, who have explored the relationship between geographic space and human behaviour, argue that human interactions with space can be analysed through anthropological emotions (Tuan, 1977/2001; Relph, 1976). The 'Place Perception Theory' is particularly useful in this context (Castells, 1996; Lewis, 2023). This theory posits that individuals' spatial behaviours are shaped more by subjective factors such as personal experiences, social motivations, and cultural values than by purely rational considerations. Tuan (1977/2001) elaborates on this through the concept of *Topophilia*, which refers to the emotional connections people form with places (Tuan, 1977). This theoretical framework can be applied to analyse the imaginative geospatial projections of students in Sri Lanka's faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences regarding their future living spaces, as illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

"After completing my degree, I hope to go to England for further studies. If I can't go to England, I will try to go to another country where English is spoken as the mother tongue. After that, I hope to stay there. I believe that England is a better place to live with a better standard of living. My family and relatives say so" (IDIT-i-12: Female student, 25 years old, from the wet zone, urban; interview conducted on 2025.02.01).

In this instance, the belief that "England is a better place to live" represents a subjective fantasy informed by the socio-cultural values of the student and the community in which she currently resides. England is imagined as a space of autonomy and hegemonic superiority, reflecting dependency on dominant global narratives (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2022; Mouffe, 2014). However, this perception does not take into account recent trends such as the internal migration of native Anglo-Saxon populations from various parts of the United Kingdom to other regions, often in search of more affordable or sustainable living conditions (Wang et al., 2022).

Theories of *Place Attachment* and *Place Identity* examine how environmental psychological factors influence individuals' emotional and cognitive connections to specific places (Peng et al., 2020). According to these theories, individuals often maintain a deep, spiritual connection to familiar environments. This connection typically surpasses any attachment to unfamiliar areas. People are often reluctant to leave these mentally and emotionally significant places, even when confronted with economic disadvantages. Changing one's relationship with a familiar geographical space is therefore not a straightforward process (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

"I am from a rural agricultural area in the Monaragala District. Our village is a very beautiful place. I went to the village school. All my relatives live in that area. My greatest joy is visiting my village during every university vacation. However, after completing my degree, I am planning to go to Japan. I know I won't get a job in Sri Lanka immediately after graduation. Even if I do, the salary will be very low. Many of our friends have gone to Japan for postgraduate studies and then stayed on to work and earn money. According to them, Japan is a good place to go for a while, earn money, and come back. No matter how beautiful my village is, I don't plan to stay there in the future, because it won't give me the life I want" (IDIT-i-12: Female student, 24 years old, from the dry zone, rural; interview conducted on 2025.01.27).

As the theories of *Place Attachment* and *Place Identity* suggest, in order for individuals to detach from environments to which they are spiritually and emotionally bound, sufficiently powerful factors must emerge to break that connection (Peng et al., 2020). In the case of the student above, her deep emotional attachment to her village is evident. Nevertheless, multiple forces, including economic pressures, capitalist aspirations, peer influence, and the anticipation of a higher standard of living, have collectively constructed fantasy images that weaken this attachment. These factors have gradually disrupted her connection to her home region and redirected her aspirations toward the global capitalist core.

Mental Maps and Perception Theory explains that human spatial understanding is fundamentally a psychological and cognitive process. Individuals perceive physical and human geographical features through the mental maps they construct in their minds (Gould & White, 2005; Lynch, 1964). According to this theory, space and time are not merely objective realities but are instead analysed as imaginary constructs formed in the human mind based on physical and human geographical experiences (Lynch, 1964). When one's mental map of their current living space is not comforting or satisfying, people tend to create imagined mental representations of alternative spaces, fantasising about migrating to those places (Lynch, 1964). The dreams of undergraduates in the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties about changing their future living environments can be analysed through this theoretical framework.

"With the economic crisis that emerged during the COVID period, I have a dark image of Sri Lanka in my mind. I want to leave. I've seen milk powder advertisements from New Zealand, and I imagine a beautiful, isolated grassland and a free life there. I can't let go of the dark memories of Sri Lanka. I would love to live in cold New Zealand. My favourite country

is New Zealand" (IDIT-i-02: Female student, 23 years old, from the rural wet zone; interview conducted on 2025.01.20)

The mental map this student constructs of New Zealand, shaped by the challenges in her current environment, is a fantasy rather than a reflection of reality. The actual experiences of Sri Lankans involved in dairy farming in New Zealand are quite different (IDIT-ii-06).

"Living in New Zealand is an extremely difficult thing. Especially, the cost of living is much higher than in Sri Lanka. Job opportunities here are very limited. People who come from Sri Lanka for work often end up helpless. Even locals are now moving to Australia in search of jobs. This country is indeed beautiful, but finding a good job is extremely hard. Jobs related to dairy farming are particularly tough. Right now, it's the calving season, and I am busy all day, hardly any rest at all. I'm looking after 280 cows by myself. If you're not truly interested in this kind of work, it becomes unbearable. Living in isolation here is also very hard to cope with" (IDIT-ii-06: Male dairy farmer, 44 years old, Ortago, New Zealand, who has 15 years of experience in the field, interview conducted on 2025.02.10).

Behavioural geographers argue that economic factors are not the primary determinants of people's choices regarding future living spaces (Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015). Instead, external factors are often more influential than purely psychological ones. As explained by Behavioural Decision-Making Theory, individuals' imaginations about their desired spaces are shaped by para-imaginary psychological factors, rather than by objective physical or human geographical realities (Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015). Therefore, in analysing fantasies related to migration and personal sacrifice, it is more meaningful to focus on individual psychological behaviour than on the economic or geographic realities influencing those decisions (Sonkar & Ram, 2024).

Fantasying to Migrant: Education, Age, Security, and Social Influence in Theoretical Perspective

The prospect-refuge theory developed by Appleton, 1975 can be presented as a theory that explains why people are drawn to abandon their familiar geographical spaces. This theory suggests that human beings, guided by an instinct for evolutionary survival, are naturally attracted to environments they perceive as safe (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004). This study also highlights how the concepts of freedom and security have contributed to the migration fantasies constructed by university students pursuing degrees in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

"I feel that Sri Lanka is not a safe country to live in. Especially when it comes to women, there are many issues in Sri Lanka. We only begin to understand that there is such a problem when we study gender and social issues in university course modules. I want to immigrate to a safe country like the United Kingdom for higher education and permanent residency. Freedom and security are the most important things" (IDIT-i-15 Female student, 25 years old, from the rural wet zone; interview conducted on 2025.02.21).

Young people from peripheral countries often fantasise about new places where they believe they can access economic, educational, or social opportunities, assuming that such access will ensure their safety and survival (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004). However, they rarely engage in a critical analysis of how realistic these fantasies actually are. The following presents the experience of a woman who migrated to the United Kingdom for higher education.

“Freedom and security are two extremely important concepts in determining where people choose to live. I came to the United Kingdom for higher education while working as a university lecturer in Sri Lanka. In fact, I had a genuine need to stay in this country. When considering gender dynamics or any other context, it is true that Sri Lanka faces many issues related to freedom and security. In contrast, those issues are minimal in this country. However, instead, I now face a range of other challenges, such as economic difficulties, the psychological stress caused by isolation, and problems arising from being part of an ethnic minority. At present, I feel more insecure here than I did in Sri Lanka” (IDIT-ii-01: female PhD Student, 46 years old, who has 03 years of living experience in the UK, interview conducted on 2025.02.08).

Students studying in the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties in Sri Lanka fall within the age range of 22 to 26 years. Furthermore, education has provided them with an opportunity to escape the isolation commonly found in rural environments. This study reveals that such circumstances have contributed to shaping their mindset and motivated them to consider migration to developed foreign countries.

“I’m from a rural area in the Kurunegala District. None of my family, my mother, father, or relatives has ever gone abroad. In our village, the poorest women go to the Middle East as domestic workers. People consider it a difficult and unpleasant job. But after coming to university, I realised that if there’s a chance to go to a country like Australia at a young age, it would be a good opportunity. Once I complete my degree, I will try to go to a better country” (IDIT-i-21 Female student, 25 years old, from the rural dry zone; interview conducted on 2025.02.25).

This situation can be analysed through the Life-Course Migration Theory developed by Elder Jr (1998). This theory explains that there is a relationship between a person’s age and migration. Migration patterns vary according to age. Particularly during youth, factors such as education, marriage, and employment lead young people to construct fantasies about changing their familiar geographical spaces (Bernard et al., 2014; Lulle, 2024).

Students who enter the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties from rural areas are suddenly exposed to a large and diverse society. As revealed in this study, social influences such as interactions within social networks, engagement with students from various social strata and disciplines, as well as the stories shared by university lecturers who have studied abroad, and the fact that many young lecturers who go overseas for higher education do not return to Sri Lanka have contributed to the development of migration fantasies among these students.

“When our young lecturers go to developed countries for their studies, they don’t come back. They only return if they go to places like China or India. A lecturer who had been to New Zealand once spoke about the country. After hearing that, I also felt like going to New Zealand after completing my degree” (IDIT-i-18: Female student, 24 years old, from the rural dry zone; interview conducted on 2025.02.25).

The Cumulative Causation & Social Influence Theory explains that young people’s decision to change their familiar living space is not always a rational act based on their own personal needs, but rather occurs as a result of fantasies constructed under social influence. This theory, developed by (Myrdal, 1957), can also be applied to analyse the migration dreams of students studying in the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties in Sri Lanka regarding their future living environments. According to the theory, when the social group a person belongs to collectively attempts to migrate to a certain geographical space, that individual may develop migration fantasies, even without a specific personal reason (Korinek et al., 2025; Myrdal, 1957). In particular, social conversations, parental influence, the migration of friends, public opinion, and current migration trends all shape individual psychology and behaviour (Korinek et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The study conducted on the future living geo-spaces desired by undergraduate students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Ruhuna primarily revealed that complex psychological factors analysed within the discipline of human behavioural geography have significantly influenced their fantasised geographical areas. Key among these factors are age, education, social influence, psychological perception, and global geopolitical imaginaries. According to the findings, 99% of the surveyed students believe that they must change their current living geographical space. The majority of these students’ fantasies are directed toward Western capitalist countries, particularly those dominated by Anglo-Saxon populations where English is the mother tongue and which exert political and economic autonomous power. This condition has been confirmed by the study as being rooted in Sri Lanka’s colonial history under British rule, and reflects the constructed relationship between autonomy and hegemony. Furthermore, the study clearly shows that the students’ fantasies are oriented toward the capitalist core, reflecting aspirations for migration. This overwhelming preference indicates a strong and interconnected relationship with the global core-periphery dynamic. Within this dynamic, Western capitalist countries are imagined by students as spaces that offer freedom and security, whereas Sri Lanka is perceived as a peripheral state, incapable of ensuring those same conditions. This perception shapes their desire to migrate and reflects a broader, systemic pattern of global inequality embedded within youth aspirations.

It became evident that the geospatial fantasies of students studying in the faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences can be theoretically analysed through several key theories, including World Systems Theory, Place Attachment Theory, Behavioural Decision-Making Theory, Life-Course Migration Theory, and Cumulative Causation and Social Influence Theory. What clearly emerged is that students’ fantasies and aspirations regarding migration are not based solely on eco-

conomic reasoning, but are shaped by complex behavioural geographical fantasies, constructed through imaginaries of place, narratives of peers of similar age, dominant notions of success, and prevailing social ideals. In particular, rural students who enter the faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences begin to mentally detach from their familiar rural geographies through education, which contributes to the construction of fantasised future migration aspirations. The study revealed that exposure to broader social discourse enables these rural students to transcend class and mental spatial boundaries, and that their desire to construct new identities is expressed through the reorientation of their life-spaces toward capitalist countries.

Ultimately, this study emphasises that the migration fantasies of undergraduate students in the Humanities and Social Sciences are not merely isolated personal desires, but are deeply rooted in global inequalities, local socio-cultural conditions, and theoretical structures tied to place, identity, and spatial specificities. This situation contributes to brain drain and hinders the realisation of national educational goals of Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is essential that the existing local void that fuels these youth migration fantasies is addressed at the state policy level. These findings are significant for policy-makers, as they offer a critical basis to re-evaluate the current situation and consider how to retain the future life aspirations and spatial dreams of Humanities and Social Science graduates within their own country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude all those who contributed to the provision of primary data for this research, as well as Dr E. H. G. C. Pathmasiri of the Department of Geography, University of Ruhuna, for his valuable assistance in preparing the map presented herein.

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