



The Moderating Influence of Internship Program on the Relationship between Undergraduates' Perception and their Intention to Join Tourism and Hospitality Industry: A Theoretical Model

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ABSTRACT

A successful firm in the tourism and hospitality industry requires skilled and committed employees. However, in the current tourism and hospitality industry, the top challenge lies in the attraction and retention of qualified and skilled employees and a great proportion of the graduates fail to enter the industry. It is therefore important to provide a value conceptual model that expounds on the theoretical relationships existing between the perceptions of undergraduate students and their intention to join the industry. This study contributes to literature by clarifying the perceptions of students-intention to join the industry relationship and by determining the moderating influence of the internship program on such relationship.

Keywords: Intention to Join Industry, Students' Perception, Internship Program, Tourism and Hospitality Industry

JEL Classifications: L83, M39

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the estimation of the World Tourism Organization in 2009, the world wide international tourist arrivals would increase to 1.6 billion by 2020 (UNWTO, 2009), with the best prospects in 2015 being Asia Pacific and the Americas (both +4% to +5%) (UNWTO, 2015).

This is compounded by the report of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) of how the travel and tourism sector produced U.S.\$7.6 trillion constituting 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP), and created 277 million jobs (1 in 11 jobs) for the global economy as of 2014 (WTTC, 2015). Added to this, in the same year, the travel and tourism industry also created 105,408,000 jobs directly constituting 3.6% of the total employment, and this is expected to grow by 2.0% in the next year (2015) to 107,519,000 constituting 3.6% of total employment. Travel and tourism is also expected to account for the creation of 130,694,000 jobs

by 2025, which will account for 2.0% pa over the next decade (WTTC, 2015).

In the context of Malaysia, tourism has been a great contributor to the economic value of GDP (Yen and Othman, 2011; Zialiani et al., 2011) and Malaysia has been experiencing a steady growth in the industry, with tourist expenditure increasing over the years. Specifically, statistics show that tourist expenditure increased from 2008 (RM20.97 million) to 2014 (RM27.44 million), with receipts amounting to RM72 billion (Tourism Malaysia, 2015).

The increasing importance of the tourism sector calls for countries to make use of an organized method to facilitate talent planning and development with the collaboration of the industry, government and educational institutions to make sure that the industry's potential in the coming years are fulfilled (WTTC, 2015). Regardless of the increasing demand for skills, a great proportion of graduate students steer clear of going into a career in

hospitality and as such, the industry is confronted with a significant problem involving the attraction, recruitment, and retention of future workforce (Song and Chon, 2012).

To compound the matter further, as the above issue has been increasingly faced by the tourism and hospitality industry, in the present time, there is a lack of skilled personal employees to staff the tourism and hospitality business (Blomme et al., 2009; Ferris et al., 2002; Ko et al., 2007). Moreover, according to some prior studies, the tourism and hospitality industry appears not to be the top career chosen by graduates of the hospitality program (e.g., Chang et al., 2014; Richardson and Butler, 2012).

On the basis of Kobina and Neequaye's (2014) study, the career choice behavior of students from the tourism and hospitality program can be attributed to the image held by the industry, and graduates who are desirous of joining the industry have to perceive that the industry is good (Blomme et al., 2009). Generally speaking, prior studies examined the determinants of tourism and hospitality graduates' perceptions and expectations towards a career in the industry (e.g., Blomme et al., 2009; Richardson, 2010; Lu and Adler, 2009). However, studies examining the factors that influence the students' intention to join hospitality and tourism industry, and studies that explain the link between students' perception and intention to join industry are still few (Chuang and Dellmann-Jenkins, 2010; Kim and Park, 2013).

In the case of Malaysia, Richardson and Butler (2012) stated that the country's hospitality industry is in need of strategies and tactics that attract graduate students and of factors that students find significant in the industry when they select their future career. Moreover, studies in the context of Malaysia concerning the examination of the tourism and hospitality graduates' justification for steering clear of or quitting the hospitality industry are still scarce (Ahmad et al., 2014).

The above issue prompted the researchers to determine the factors that affect the graduates' intention to join the tourism and hospitality industry, where the primary aim of this study is to determine the relationship between the perception of undergraduate students of the industry and their intention to join it.

It is therefore important for the industry to come up with strategies to employ for the attraction, recruitment, and retention of high quality graduates in the tourism and hospital program (Richardson and Butler, 2012). Following this argument, in order to attract students to the industry, prior studies like Doniņa (2015) and Lam and Ching (2007) stated that the universities and the industry should have a close collaboration to create an effective quality internship program. Such a program can be deployed as a major strategic tool to determine talent and a promising industry investment (Shan and Tsai, 2011).

In a related study, Kim and Park (2013) found that undergraduate perceptions of career choice in the tourism and hospitality industry can be swayed by their first impressions during their internships - Such impression can either improve or deter their outlook of the industry.

Nevertheless, despite the major role of internship in influencing graduates' perceptions, majority of studies failed to explain the way internship programs impact the intention of students to choose the hospitality industry as their career choice (Chen and Shen, 2012). From this argument, the second objective of the study is to determine the important role of internship program on the relationship between the perception of students of the tourism and hospitality industry, and their intention to join such industry in the context of Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Career Intention to Join the Industry

Career intention refers to the level to which an individual has laid down plans to perform or refrain from performing certain future behavior (Warshaw and Davis, 1985). Based on this definition, students will be inclined to a career choice, which requires them to use their skills that match with the personality traits (Tinsley, 2000). In other words, graduate students aim to find positions that are aligned to their overall needs and personality traits (Verquer et al., 2003).

Several studies showed that the proportion of managers/employees holding a university degree in tourism/hospitality management or other higher educational degrees is still low compared with those in other industries (Purcell and Quinn, 1996). This is compounded by the fact that tourism and hospitality management graduates often steer clear of working in the industry, preferring instead to be employed in other industries (Brown et al., 2014). Similarly, Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) revealed a weak commitment to the tourism industry among the study sample of undergraduate students.

As a consequence, the industry is facing a challenge in positioning as a more attractive career option in the eyes of youth as only around half of the tourism and hospitality and management graduates opt to be employed in hospitality positions (King et al., 2003).

It is thus crucial to pinpoint where the gaps exist in order for educators and practitioners to tackle the changes required. In relation to this, majority of educators and practitioners in the tourism and hospitality programs are currently exerting effort to comprehend students in light of their career goals and intentions (Chuang and Dellmann-Jenkins, 2010; Richardson, 2009; Song and Chathoth, 2011). This calls for the determination of the perceptions of students who are inclined towards following a career in the tourism and hospitality industry.

2.2. Students' Perceptions towards Tourism and Hospitality Industry

According to Richardson (2008), the commitment of an employee to an industry is often determined by his perception towards such industry and hence, hospitality graduates should be motivated to have a positive perception of the tourism and hospitality business. The students' poor perception of the industry will let them steer clear of it and in essence, the industry will require more qualified and skilled graduates because otherwise this could negatively

impact customer satisfaction, quality of service and overall performance. Industry firms, in this case, have to focus on the factors that influence potential future employees (i.e., graduate students).

The above contention is supported by studies in literature (Aksu and Köksal, 2005; Brien, 2004; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000) who stated that students' perception is specifically significant to the tourism and hospitality industry as it has been evidenced that potential employees have a negative image of the industry. If staff is considered as a mechanism to gain competitive advantage, it is logical to say that the tourism and hospitality management graduates should be encourage to have a positive attitude towards the tourism and hospitality industry (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000).

The factors that account for students' perceptions towards tourism and hospitality industry have been examined by Aksu and Köksal (2005), Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) and Richardson (2008). The authors stated that such factors include nature of work, social status and industry-person congeniality, physical working conditions, pay and benefits, promotion opportunities, co-workers and managers and industry commitment. These factors may determine the students satisfaction or otherwise with the industry and they may influence their motivations in schools and entrance into the industry.

Added to the above factors, Chang et al. (2014) also claimed that the students' emotional intelligence and service orientation determine their intention to embark on a career in the hospitality industry and as such, they suggested that future studies examine other variables that may have the potential to influence the career intentions of students towards the hospitality industry.

Based on previous discussion we can argue that the students' inclination to join the hospitality industry may be influence by their industry perception and thus, it is important to focus on the perception factors of the students in order to motivate them to have a positive perception of the industry and ultimately join it. In order to guarantee that a positive perception is harbored by students and that students seek a hospitality career post-graduation, it is crucial for educational institutions and the industry to come together and come up with an effective internship program to provide the students with added experience and an enriching career (Richardson, 2008).

2.3. Internship Program as a Moderator

An internship program serves as an opportunity to minimize the gap between college-obtained theory and practical work (Fox, 2011). Several studies have advocated the advantages of students' internship programs (e.g., Siegel et al., 2010; Tse, 2010; Ko, 2007). Internship programs enable students to examine their future careers, to understand it and to settle on a career of their choice (Ko, 2007; Nelson, 1994). Specifically, Tse (2010) stated that some students are dependent on the internship program to show them the way to their career path, and to solidify their intention towards the hospitality industry may depend on their experience in the program. Also, Fox (2001) contended that a

negative internship experience could rapidly turn a young person away from the industry.

Furthermore, Aksu and Köksal (2005) revealed a significant impact on students' perception takes place during preparation in schools - An internship can be considered as one of those preparations that provide students a change to undertake practical work to add to the theory obtained from classes. Other studies like Kim and Park (2013) and Richardson and Botler (2012) stressed on the understanding of the way tourism and hospitality industry employers use students as part-time workers and the work-based learning programs are influencing the students' decision to embark on a hospitality career. Hence, a balance should be created between the diverse internship experiences and career specific courses so students can adequately prepare themselves to enter into the hospitality industry armed with realistic expectations (Brown et al., 2014).

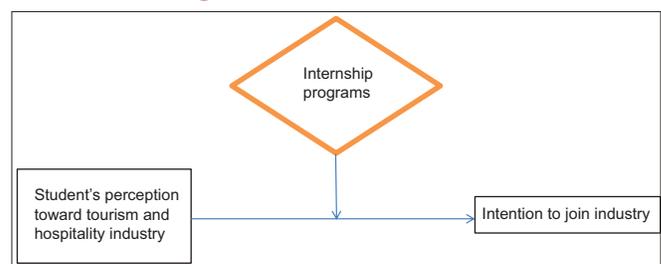
The above argument is aligned with that of Richardson's (2010) who revealed that educational institutions and the industry have to come together in an effective collaboration to guarantee that students experience what they expect to when they actually undertake work placements or as part-time workers. This will ensure that students harbor a positive perception of the hospitality industry and more students are attracted to enter into the same career after they graduate. Despite the arguments made by several studies concerning the advantages of internship, only some studies made empirical investigations (Maertz et al., 2014). This was also highlighted by Brown et al. (2014) in their study when they urged further studies to explore the effect of internship during undergraduate programs on the career intention of students and overall retention.

On the basis of the literature reviewed, it can be stated that an internship program may affect the students' intention to join the tourism and hospitality industry and as such, an internship program can play a key role in enhancing the relationship between the students' perception of the hospitality industry, and their joining intention. Internship can also assist the students to develop a comprehensive picture of the actual industry and to rectify their negative image of it, and ultimately for them to join the industry.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

On the basis of the thorough literature review, the study proposes the research model in Figure 1. The model conceptualizes the

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



relationship between graduate students perceptions towards tourism and hospitality industry, and their intention to join the industry. It also posits the moderating influence of internship program on the above proposed relationship. The model can be employed to form the basis of future empirical researches.

4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDIES

Although several studies have examined the factors influencing the perception and attitude of students towards the tourism and hospitality industry, studies on the relationship between students' perception and their intention to join the industry are still scarce. Accordingly, the present study minimizes the gap in literature by determining the relationship between the students' perception and their intention to join the tourism and hospitality industry, with the internship program as a moderating variable. Further empirical study in this area is in progress along with a follow-up of undergraduate students via survey to determine statistical findings.

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