Academic Papers

Normative factors influencing hospitality instructors to teach online

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of online learning in higher education has been met with varying degrees of acceptance among faculty and administrators. Although hospitality management instructors recognize the prominence of online learning as the future of higher education, their current apprehensions may hinder institutional strategic objectives. This study examined hospitality instructors' intentions to teach an online course, using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), deconstructing subjective norms into student, colleague, and department chair influences. The findings from this research will be useful to program administrators who seek to encourage hospitality faculty to teach online courses.

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1. Introduction

Online learning in higher education has undergone dramatic growth in recent years. In 2010, one million more students were enrolled in higher education online courses than in the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Research regarding online course delivery clearly supports the trend toward increasing student enrollments and the rising popularity of this mode of instruction. Strategic objectives also lend credence to online learning, as 63% of institutions participating in a recent survey agreed online course offerings were an integral component to long-term growth (Allen & Seaman, 2010). By contrast, in the same study, isolating responses specifically from hospitality management programs, only 44.3% stated online learning was a vital part of long-term strategic planning (Sciarini, Beck, & Seaman, 2012), signifying less interest than other disciplines for online teaching within hospitality.

Hospitality management programs have been historically slow to adopt new teaching formats (Sigala & Baum, 2003). Consistent with previous findings, hospitality instructors are not alone in this predicament, as faculty from other disciplines also exhibit a reluctance to embrace online teaching technologies (Allen & Seaman, 2010). However, as concerns are rising about increased student enrollments coinciding with decreased state and federal funding, online learning might offer a possible solution to these challenges.

The advantages in creating distance-learning opportunities are abundant. Some of the most prevalent reasons for implementing online education include scheduling flexibility for working and nontraditional students (Miller & Lu, 2003) and the ability to circumvent physical space limitations on campus while creating opportunities for increased course enrollments (Blumenstyk, 2012). Leveraging distance learning has also proven to be an excellent revenue generator and profit source for some institutions (Blumenstyk, 2012).

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The purpose of this research was to empirically examine hospitality instructors' intentions to teach an online course using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as the guiding theoretical framework. Specifically, the subjective norm construct within the model was deconstructed to focus on the normative influences of hospitality students, colleagues and supervisors on hospitality instructors' intentions to teach online. The findings from this study will assist hospitality program chairs and administrators to understand the normative pressures influencing faculty to teach online and perhaps even leverage these influences to encourage hospitality instructors to participate in this form of instruction.

2. Literature review

Over the last several years, online learning has been leveraged across countless academic disciplines, having a significant impact on higher education. This pedagogical shift has resulted in numerous studies including those with a focus on student and faculty satisfaction with online programs, both prior to (Liaw, Huang, & Chen, 2007; Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008) and during enrollment (Liaw et al., 2007; Samarawichrema & Stacey, 2007; Liu, Chen, Sun, Wible, & Kuo, 2010). While student and faculty commitment impact favorable outcomes of online courses, it is primarily faculty acceptance and attitudes that remain the critical components to the overall success of an online program (Wilson & Stacey, 2004; Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009).

As an intensely service-related discipline, the study of hospitality poses complex challenges with regard to online course delivery. Factors, such as the experiential learning component specific to hospitality management programs, generate feelings of ambiguity among faculty as to the effectiveness of online teaching in a customer-driven field of study. Meanwhile, institutional strategic initiatives put additional pressure on programs to increase enrollment while meeting the needs of untapped working and nontraditional student populations. These challenges faced by hospitality administrators have not been investigated in terms of how instructors might be persuaded to embrace online learning more readily to meet program needs.

In recent years, the hospitality industry has been transformed by advancements in information and communication technologies, a trend which has subsequently impacted the discipline in higher education. While there is a large body of research examining online course delivery in general, this phenomenon is comparatively under-investigated with regard to hospitality higher education. A sample of recent studies with a hospitality education focus include: the connected and hospitable online classroom environment (Deale & White, 2012); online problem based learning with postgraduates new to the online environment (Duncan, Smith, & Cook, 2013); engagement of sports science students via online learning assessments (Micklewright, Pearsall, & Sellens, 2010); use of social media and web 2.0 technologies in the virtual classroom (Liburd & Christensen, 2013); and the value of online discussion boards for group work (Robinson, 2011). These studies no longer focus solely on adoption, but rather on improvements to teaching and learning in the online classroom.

Although eLearning studies are increasing in number along with the proliferation of online learning technologies in the discipline, very few studies have employed the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to test a user's intention to adopt the technology. For example, TAM has recently been tested in hospitality education from a user satisfaction perspective (Song, 2010). On another occasion, to determine user intention in a hospitality classroom, Jacques, Deale, and Garger (2006) employed TAM to measure students' acceptance of a clicker device to complete quizzes and deliver feedback.

From the industry standpoint, TAM has been employed to understand consumer behaviors and employee technology applications to improve strategic competitiveness (Wang & Qualis, 2007). Hotel guest empowerment (Schrier, Erdem, & Brewer, 2010), and tourist acceptance of mobile technology (Kim, Park, & Morrison, 2008) are two of the more notable guest-focused examples of TAM in hospitality research. Other studies have considered the service provider perspective by examining employees' acceptance of front office systems (Kim, Lee, & Law, 2008) and information systems in upscale hotels (Huh, Kim, & Law, 2009). Aside from TAM-based research on technology use in the hospitality *industry*, there still remains a lack of TAM-based hospitality *education* research.

2.1. Technology acceptance model

The theoretical foundation for this study was the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) which is applied to predict an individual's intention to use a technology based on the perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEU) of the system (Davis, 1989). Derived from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), TAM has been tested across several disciplines and has been validated as a rigorous and parsimonious model for predicting user intention of new technologies (Taylor & Todd, 1995). In an effort to pinpoint the exact mode of entry for training interventions, researchers set out to expand the original TAM to include several other determinants to PU. These variables have been added to improve the original TAM via the PU construct and increase the amount of explained variance (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

2.1.1. Subjective norm

The second iteration of TAM (TAM2) included subjective norm as a construct, which is the belief that a person's behavior will be influenced by the way they believe others will view them after having used the technology in question (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). Early studies dropped subjective norm from the model due to non-significance in mandatory