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What influences Chinese students' intentions to pursue hospitality careers? A comparison of three-year versus four-year hospitality programs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the determinants of Chinese hospitality students' career intentions in the hospitality industry and to compare the determinants of students from three-year versus four-year programs based on the theory of planned behavior. Results indicated that students' career intentions were positively influenced by their attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and previous work experience, while academic standing did not influence students' career intentions. Specifically, the effect of subjective norms on career intentions was significantly stronger for students from three-year programs, while perceived behavioral control had significantly stronger influences on students from four-year programs.

1. Introduction

Hospitality management is an industry-specific discipline, with academic programs playing a pivotal role in teaching students industry-related knowledge and providing the industry with qualified employees (Eurico, da Silva, & do Valle, 2015). As a labor-intensive industry, the hospitality industry requires many employees with professional knowledge and skills (Richardson, 2009). Compared to students with different educational backgrounds, hospitality students are better prepared for hospitality jobs since they receive more comprehensive knowledge and practical training related to what the industry requires (Airey & Frontistis, 1997). For hospitality companies, recruiting and retaining well-educated and qualified employees can provide a competitive advantage in the long-term (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000).

With the development of the national economy overall comes rapid growth in the hospitality industry in China. The numbers of both international tourists and international branded hotels continue to grow (China National Tourism Administration CNTA, 2016; Wu, Morrison, Yang, Zhou, & Cong, 2014; Yang, Cheung, & Song, 2016). According to a recent report, the number of inbound travelers from foreign countries and regions to mainland China has reached 138 million in 2016, generating \$120 billion in the Chinese economy (CNTA, 2017). To stay competitive and successful in the market, attracting and retaining qualified professionals is crucial for hospitality companies (Eurico, da Silva, & do Valle, 2015).

The number of hospitality programs in China has also increased over the years (CNTA, 2017; King, McKercher, & Waryszak, 2003). The total number of hospitality programs including those in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and vocational schools offered in 2007 was 1641. This number has increased nearly 59.3% in ten years, reaching 2614 programs in 2016 (CNTA, 2008,

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2017). Specifically, it consists of 1690 hospitality programs in Higher Education Institutions, which include four-year degree (bachelor's degree) granting schools and three-year degree (associate degree) granting schools. HEIs play an important role in fostering the educational interests of students and preparing them for their future careers (Eurico, da Silva, & do Valle, 2015; Gill & Leigh, 2003; Hanushek, Schwerdt, Woessmann, & Zhang, 2017). The primary goal of general HEIs is to provide students with comprehensive knowledge and basic skills that pertain to their future professions (Hanushek et al.). In total, there were 440,400 students enrolled in hospitality management programs in HEIs in China in 2016 (CNTA, 2016).

As the hospitality industry continues to grow, it is important to recruit and retain well-educated hospitality students to work in the industry after graduation. However, researchers found that many hospitality or tourism students chose to pursue careers in other industries (e.g., banking, government, real estate) after graduation, and only 10–20% of graduates stayed in the hospitality industry (Gu, Kavanaugh, & Cong, 2007; Song & Wang, 2008; Wong, Liu, & Bao, 2007; Wu, Morrison, Yang, Zhou, & Cong, 2014). To further explore why hospitality students choose to pursue other careers, Sun (2015) conducted research with hospitality undergraduate students in mainland China and found that the image of hospitality jobs was an influential factor on students' career intentions. The nature of tourism jobs, social and family pressure, and the benefits provided by government jobs had also discouraged students from pursuing careers in the tourism industry (Wu, 2013). Furthermore, Chinese students' career choices were influenced by their parents' expectations (Wong & Liu, 2010; Wong et al., 2007).

In mainland China, four levels of degrees are offered beyond 12 years of primary and secondary education: Associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctoral degree (Jiang, 2017; Liu & Liu, 2005). Lam and Xiao (2000) estimated that half of hospitality students in China study for bachelor's or graduate degrees and the other half for the two- or three-year associate degree or certificate. Curriculum design researchers have pointed out that hospitality students in four-year program tend to be more research and theoretical oriented while those in three-year program might receive more practical training (Huimin & Hobson, 2008). Such differences among student bodies and in curriculum designs between three- vs. four-year programs might cause different students' career intentions and job retentions in the hospitality industry (Huimin & Hobson, 2008). Many researchers have assessed students' career intentions, with most only focusing on four-year hospitality programs. Although graduates of three-year programs make up an important component of the hospitality workforce in China, their career intentions remain largely unexplored. Therefore, to address this gap in the literature and to better understand hospitality students' attitudes and career intentions, the authors of this study recruited students from both three-year and four-year hospitality programs in China as the study sample. In addition, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model was adapted to examine the significant factors affecting students' career intentions. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to compare the differences between students from three-year and four-year hospitality programs.

In sum, the purpose of this study was to identify factors influencing career intentions of hospitality students in mainland China. The specific objectives were to (1) determine students' intentions of entering the hospitality industry after graduation; (2) identify the differences of career intention predictors between students from three-year degree granting programs and those from four-year degree granting hospitality programs, and (3) provide recommendations to hospitality educators and industry professionals regarding ways to improve the recruitment and retention of hospitality graduates.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. The Theory of Planned Behavior

First described more than 30 years ago, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has become one of the most popular and frequently used models in a wide variety of empirical studies (Ajzen, 2006, 2011; Armitage & Conner, 2001). In the TPB model, three variables, including attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, are influential factors that affect behavioral intention, which in turn predicts consumers' behaviors (Ajzen, 2006). The TPB model explains the determinants of an individual's decision to engage in a certain behavior and the relationship between attitudes and behaviors (Conner & Armitage, 1998) and has been frequently used in predicting human social behaviors (Ajzen, 2011).

In the TPB model, behavior intention refers to an individual's readiness to perform a certain behavior and has been assumed to be an immediate antecedent of behavior (Ajzen, 2002). Attitude is "a person's positive or negative evaluation of other people, objects, event, activities, ideas or just about everything in your environment" (Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977, p. 745). A subjective norm refers to a person's perception of social normative pressures, or relevant others' beliefs that he or she should or should not perform such behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Perceived behavioral control is a person's perception of the relative ease of performing a given behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which is determined by a total set of accessible control beliefs. Behavioral control affects a person's intention to perform a certain behavior and has a direct effect on the given behavior.

The TPB model had been widely applied in sociology, education, health, and management research (Yang, 2008). For example, hospitality researchers used the TPB model to examine vocational college hospitality students' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control toward internships and their career intentions (Hsu, 2012). Goh and Ritchie (2011) used the TPB model as a framework to study hospitality students' attitudes and perceived constraints toward field trips. The current study adopted the TPB model to identify and compare the differences of students' attitudes and career intentions between two different types (i.e., three-year and four-year degree granting) of hospitality educational programs in China.

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