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Marketing Strategies in the Decision-Making Process for Undergraduate Choice in Pursuit of Hospitality and Tourism Higher Education: The Case of Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the decision-making factors for pursuit of hospitality and tourism Bachelor's degrees from a consumer behavior perspective. Based on the 5-stage decision-making process model, the 7Ps of the marketing mix were examined. Qualitative in-depth semi-structured group interviews with Hong Kong students were conducted using NVivo and the Framework Method. The findings show that marketing strategies can act as supporting and facilitating tools in attracting more potential students. Higher education institutions can promote their programs by helping students to visualize their future careers in the hospitality and tourism industry.

KEYWORDS

7Ps; marketing strategy; decision-making model; career choice; undergraduate degree

Introduction

The phenomenon of the shortage of skilled talent in the hospitality and tourism industry, such as in hotels and catering, transportation, and other personal services, is a global issue (WTTC, 2015). WTTC (2015) data show that 37 out of 46 countries are facing a talent “deficit” or “shortage”; a shortfall of 14 million jobs in the travel and tourism sector is forecast, which stands to reduce its potential contribution to global gross domestic product (GDP) by US\$610 billion over the next ten years. Examples of countries reporting such worries are Canada (TWIG, 2017), India (Barot, 2012), Singapore (Singapore Tourism Board, 2019), and Australia (AusTrade, 2017). Australia reported 38,000 unfilled positions representing a vacancy rate of 7% in 2015 (AusTrade, 2017). Singapore's tourism receipts and visitor arrivals for 2017 achieved record highs but at the same time its accommodation and food services providers had the highest job vacancy levels at 6.4% and 4.9%, respectively (AHC, 2018). This manpower challenge was emphasized in Singapore's quest for solutions to attain sustainable growth in the tourism industry (Singapore Tourism Board, 2019).

Meanwhile, Hong Kong's international tourism receipts of US\$32.9 billion ranked ninth of the world's tourist destinations in 2016 (UNWTO, 2017). Tourism is one of the four major pillar industries in Hong Kong and alongside trading, logistics, and the financial sector, it has long been a major driving force in Hong Kong's

economy (LegCo, 2015). The industry grew 263% from 2000 to 2016, contributed 4.7% of GDP in 2016, and represented a share of 6.8% of total employment (Census and Statistics Department, 2018). In 2013, the industry employed 269,700 persons or 7.2% of total employment (GovHK, 2015), and it is projected that the industry would require 307,500 persons by 2022 in Hong Kong (Labour and Welfare Bureau (2015). A high turnover rate for hotel employees of 35% was recorded in 2018 among Hong Kong Hotels Association member hotels, representing half of the total hotels in Hong Kong (SCMP, 2019). The problem of severe skilled manpower shortage has been continuing. With the current hotel construction pipeline of an additional 12,000 hotel rooms in Hong Kong, plus a total of 580,000 hotel rooms in the pipeline in Mainland China, it can be foreseen that the industry manpower shortage will further intensify (HospitalityNet, 2019).

The serious skilled manpower shortage globally in the hospitality and tourism industry can best be overcome through provision of more training and education opportunities. Future industry leaders, as well as hospitality and tourism workers can be made available via various hospitality and tourism education programs (Choi et al., 2019). Industry, tertiary institutions, and governments are all trying hard to attract more talent to meet industry needs. However, as consumers, students these days have abundant choice among higher education programs and tertiary institutions. The decision whether to choose the hospitality and tourism discipline

or another discipline in their pursuit of higher education is still largely up to the individual young adult concerned.

This study aims to investigate factors that induce students to seek and choose degree programs in hospitality and tourism. Students are consumers, and when they choose their further study path, the program choices are the available products in the market. Before these students make their enrollment or their purchase decision, they must go through the consumer decision-making process, namely, information searching, followed by evaluating and comparing the options (Engel et al., 1990, 1968; Kotler, 1965; Moogan et al., 1999). Various factors may play important roles in affecting these students' final purchase decision such as uncontrollable internal and external factors, namely, perception, cultural background, family and social influence, as well as some controllable marketing strategies such as branding, positioning, product, pricing, place and promotion, people, process, and physical evidence strategies (Booms & Bitner, 1981; Kotler et al., 1986). This study seeks to determine noteworthy appropriate marketing approaches that would be effective during various stages of the decision-making process. From the research findings, recommendations are made to suggest suitable marketing strategies to attract more students to enroll in hospitality and tourism programs for their higher education, thus qualifying them to join the industry after graduation in order to help solve the manpower problem.

Literature Review

Students as Consumers in Choosing Higher Education

A consumer is a person who “purchases goods and services for personal use” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2019). From a marketing perspective, the meaning of “consumer” can be more specific and precise. Walters (1974, p. 4) defines a consumer as “an individual who purchases, has the capacity to purchase, goods and services offered for sale by marketing institutions in order to satisfy personal or household needs, wants, or desires.” Consumer thus is any individual who has the purchasing power and desire to purchase a product for personal consumption to satisfy personal needs. The behavior of product purchase is a category of human behavior, and this behavior comprises the actions of individuals that are influenced by and interact with the environment (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002).

Maringe (2011) looked at the significance and implications of consumer orientation by using the consumer

metaphor for higher education students and confirmed that placing the consumer at the heart of decision-making can enhance the quality and accountability of the higher education experience. Woodall et al. (2014) used the same consumer metaphor and compared the values and experience of higher education students through the concept of students as consumers and consumer value.

According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015), consumer behavior engages at different phases in the purchase actions. This study adopts the renowned buyer decision model in the analysis. Engel et al. (1968) developed a model of the consumer buying decision, which is known as the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) Model. The focal points of the model are on six stages in the decision process, namely problem recognition, search for alternatives, alternative evaluation, making the decision choice, purchase, and then outcomes. The model was further modified and revised in many later versions. In 1990, another well-recognized version was developed, which is known as the Engel–Blackwell–Miniard (EBM) Model (Engel et al., 1990). This model elaborates the purchase decision into seven steps, namely, need recognition, search, pre-purchase alternative evaluation, purchase, consumption, post-consumption evaluation, and divestment. Moreover, Kotler (1965) developed the Buyer Black Box Model, comprising the environmental factors (which are the explicit external “inputs” from marketing efforts and the macro-environment), the black box “process” (which includes need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior), and the last stage of buyer's response as the “output” (Kotler, 1965; Kotler & Armstrong, 2015). Although there have been some modifications to the model over the years, it remains the most robust model for analysis of consumer purchase decisions. This study adopts the five stages of the decision process by Kotler (1965), namely, need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation.

The marketing effort, together with other factors, may contribute to a purchase decision (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015; Solomon, 2007). This study looks at the students' decision-making process model (Engel et al., 1968) from a consumer perspective; principally, the controllable marketing factors that may affect a student in choosing a full-time post-secondary education program were examined. Controllable factors are the variables that can be managed and controlled by a business entity by means of marketing effort to suit the demand of the business (Kotler, 1986). Since higher education itself is classified as a service (Nicholls et al., 1995; Raj et al., 2013), this study is based on the concept

of service marketing (Lovelock, 2011) and mainly focuses on the 7Ps (Booms & Bitner, 1981), namely, product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence, and process. These 7Ps from the tertiary institutions were evaluated.

Marketing Mix

McCarthy (1960) first introduced the Marketing Mix (also known as 4Ps: product, price, place, and promotion) with four variables that organizations have to control in order to satisfy the needs and wants of the target customer. Development of the marketing mix concept and its implementation have received substantial academic and industry attention (Goi, 2009). Since the 1960s, numerous modifications to the 4Ps concept have been proposed. Judd (1987) proposed to add one more *P* for people. Kotler (1986) suggested adding two more *Ps* (political power and public opinion). Magrath (1986) suggested to add three more *Ps* (personnel, physical facilities, and process management), and Goldsmith (1999) suggested to add four more *Ps* (participants, physical evidence, process, and personalization). Baumgartner (1991) suggested a 15 *Ps* concept. Vignalis and Davis (1994) suggested adding one *S* (service) to the existing marketing mix. Among all the suggestions, the Booms and Bitner (1981) 7Ps framework is the most influential and the best accepted (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995). Booms and Bitner (1981) expanded the 4Ps into 7Ps by adding in three more variables: people, process, and physical evidence, which form the basis of today's service marketing concept (Lovelock, 2011). According to Booms and Bitner (1981), people are the service provider as well as other customers that influence the total service experience. Since service has the characteristic of simultaneity with production and consumption, the attitude, quality, professionalism, and efficiency of the service provider as well as the presence of other customers will affect the satisfaction level (Booms & Bitner, 1981). Physical evidence is the servicecape or the service setting, which is the tangible part of the entire service experience. Process refers to the operations systems and the logistics of the service that may affect the service delivery. All elements in the marketing mix need to be integrated, interrelated, and interdependent with each other (Armstrong & Kotler, 2012). This study thus applies the 7Ps in evaluating higher education choices. These 7Ps include: product (program content, certificate, and future employability), price (tuition fee), place (campus locations), promotion (advertising, information day, use of website and social media), people (teaching staff, administrative staff and other

students), physical evidence (campus facilities), and process (administration and application procedure).

Product

From an education perspective, product includes program content, certificate, and future employability. Higher education offers both tangible as well as intangible benefits. The certificate that the student can obtain at the end of the program counts as the tangible benefit; the broad mental stimulation gained from each specific program content, as well as the future employability after graduation can be counted as the intangible benefits. Although it is not necessary for a university to concentrate on vocational training, many students think that there should be an employment-related outcome from their education. In consequence, students may make university choices based on what they consider helpful for the employment they wish to seek (Polat, 2012). When students consider signing up to a program from a university, they may consider the future employability, whether they can get a high-paying job, if they can have good career prospects, and if there are more opportunities for future job advancement. Misran et al. (2012) studied the behavior of matriculating students in selecting universities and programs, and found that future career opportunity was one of the dominant factors influencing them. Tas and Ergin (2012) obtained similar findings, that students place a great emphasis on career advancement opportunities such as competitive career prospects and high-paying job opportunities when selecting a degree program. Among all the factors in their study (namely, university tuition fees; university location; financial assistance; brand awareness in home country; university's brand name; international recognition; national survey ranking; accreditation; home university professors; post-graduation job and career prospects; availability of PhD program; and education period), post-graduation job and career prospects were found to be the most prominent criteria during the process of selecting an undergraduate degree program.

Price

Price refers to tuition fee in the higher education context. Education institutions have to take into consideration various factors when setting the tuition fee, factors such as private or public ownership of the institution, number of competitors, service quality, placement, reputation and brand name of the institution, infrastructure and facilities provided, campus location, mode of education, etc. (Raj et al., 2013). Kotler and Fox (1985) showed the breakdown of the costs and benefits in education from consumer perspective. Costs of

education include time and effort; self/family/income loans; work-study jobs; other concurrent employment; outside scholarships; and university scholarships. Benefits of education include career prospects; prestige; ongoing experience during education; and program uniqueness. Briggs and Wilson (2007) elaborated on the price related to a course at a higher education institution as a “cost of package” when students decide on their undergraduate program, which includes the external costs (e.g., accommodation, living and travel expenses); and cost of tuition and other university fees.

Place

Since provision of education is classified as a service (Nicholls et al., 1995; Raj et al., 2013), it does not require delivery of any tangible goods by intermediary. In terms of place, the location and size of the campus, and the facilities available on campus of an education institution are considered in its place strategy. For some education institutions that offer online courses, the online learning platform is also considered as “place,” but online courses are not included in this study. If the institution is located in a city or urban area with easy transportation, it may have a competitive edge compared to one in a rural and remote location (Raj et al., 2013). Gajic (2012) suggested that the meaning of place among higher education institutions should have three aspects—first, the location of the campus; second, the characteristics of the area in which the institution is located; and thirdly, the distance between the campuses compared to where current and future students and high school students live. Briggs (2006) confirmed that strong geographic factors such as “location” and “distance from home” are top factors in influencing undergraduate student choice. Shanka et al. (2006) found a similar result, that proximity is one of the major reasons for students’ choice. Polat (2012) discovered that, beside the location of the campus, the transportation between the campus and the students’ hometowns also plays a major role in students’ considerations.

Promotion

Promotion is about communication with the potential customers. The five basic tools in promotion include: advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, and personal selling. Higher education institutions put emphasis on advertising (Raj et al., 2013). Heavy budgets have often been used in above-the-line promotions such as TV advertisements, radio advertisements, print advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and outdoor advertisements particularly for the period of student enrollment each year. In terms of sales promotion, there are information days and campus

tours organized by the higher education institutions to let all interested and potential students understand more before the admission application process. Students who attend such information days usually receive program brochures and leaflets, and information about the institution. Along with the relevant information for these students’ further consideration, they may receive small gifts and souvenirs. Most of the higher education institutions in Hong Kong have a specialized team to look after various public relations matters. Organizing events such as open day and campus visits are important for higher education institutions to provide first-hand information and experience to potential students. Moogan (2011) found that most potential students attended the open day, and a campus visit can give these students an opportunity to see and feel the campus environment providing a positive memory. This visual image and personal experience are important in their further consideration when it comes to their decision-making.

In terms of direct marketing, higher education institutions mainly make use of their websites to communicate with current and prospective students. All kinds of information are available on the websites of these institutions as well as programs offered by faculties and departments, further information about the institutions, such as their history and development, the faculty members’ background and experience, available facilities and services, campus location, and transportation, can be found on the websites. Gomes and Murphy (2003) found that prospective students seek information from reputable online sources, and university websites were the major source of information. Bonnema and van der Waldt (2008) investigated the various information sources for students in tertiary institutions, finding that advertising sources are not always preferred, but social sources or direct sources such as websites of institutions are sometimes preferred. Veloutsou et al. (2005) confirmed that university websites are one of the most reliable information sources for university selection. Hemsley-Brown (2012) examined the use of websites in higher education and measured the effectiveness of university websites. Her study discovered that applicants are influenced by the content on websites, as they repeat precisely the same nouns, adjectives, and phrases as published on the websites of their target university as reasons for their decisions. Overlapping themes and wordings related to reputation and excellence; location and environment; and teaching, learning, and employment are found to be the reasons for student choice. Simoes and Soares (2010) found that the university website is rated among the most used information sources; however, the importance of websites for

university applicants is not equal for students from all fields of study. The websites of these higher education institutions may be able to facilitate potential students' acquaintance with the institutions; thus this study seeks to determine if the institutions' websites can enhance consideration by students in choice of their post-secondary education. Constantinides and Stagno (2012) confirmed that the three most useful information channels for study selection are taster days and campus visits, official university websites, and university brochures.

Moreover, personal selling may play a role in marketing the institution and the offered programs during school talks and campus visits with the staff and faculty facilitating the event. Brown et al. (2009) found that during the stage of purchase decision, students were influenced by the people with whom they have had face-to-face contact. Students can talk to lecturers, academic staff, and current students; they can then assess the extent to which they might fit into the institution during school talks and campus visits.

People

In a higher education context, "people" includes faculty, staff, and other students. Faculty are the facilitators or service providers in education (Raj et al., 2013). Service quality in the learning process can be affected by the variability of service delivery among teaching staff (Nicholls, 1987). Babad and Tayeb (2003) discovered that the lecturer's style has high importance in students' undergraduate course selection considerations. The service quality depends upon the "competency, effectiveness, efficiency, sincerity, dedication and devotion" of the teaching staff when performing their teaching duties (Raj et al., 2013, p. 437). Voss et al. (2007) also realized that students would like to have lecturers who are knowledgeable, approachable, passionate, and friendly. Besides teaching staff involvement in service encounter, other customers (students) from the same institution may also play a role in influencing the overall customer satisfaction. Both the customer himself or herself as well as other customers' behavior are important components in the service process that affect the overall satisfaction level (Bitner, 1990). The customer-to-customer interactions can positively or negatively impact on customer loyalty and satisfaction, especially when the customers all share the same service setting (Wu, 2008). Huang (2008) realized that other customers' misbehavior can result in service failure and customer dissatisfaction. Grove and Fisk (1997) found that customers may be dissatisfied when other customers have observable differences from them.

Physical Evidence

In terms of physical evidence in education, Dumitrascu and Serban (2013) found that, among the reasons for university choice, "good facilities" and "university atmosphere" ranked the second and the third after the "study offer that fits to personal interests" of the prospective student. Polat (2012) stated that the university's infrastructure (e.g., library, computer and internet, dining hall, sports hall, dormitory) are important factors when students choose a university and department. In the education setting, students may assess the physical facilities and the infrastructure when considering an educational institution (Raj et al., 2013).

Process

The education service process involves the way service providers render services to the students. An institution will be preferred by the students if the service process is hassle-free, transparent, student-friendly, and technology-based (Raj et al., 2013). In the process of obtaining a Bachelor degree, the service process starts from the enrollment procedure, the duration of waiting time to get the service, the interview arrangement, the follow-up actions and written notifications, the duration of the entire program, the arrangement of each module and study schedule (e.g., some schools are semester-based and some are trimester-based), continuing until the graduation ceremony and distribution of the certificate. Brown et al. (2009) realized that students were surprised to receive an immediate response and felt frustrated if they had to wait too long for receipt of the initial offer during the application process; therefore, the speed of responses to student enquiries may play a role in students' decision. This study thus investigates if these 7Ps play a role in students' decision making when choosing their higher education.

Method

The study context was an examination of current undergraduates who are studying in hospitality- and tourism-related full-time Bachelor degree programs in Hong Kong. Higher education in the Hong Kong system includes sub-degrees such as Higher Diploma, pre-associate degree, and associate degree; degree; and post-graduate degree levels (Education Bureau, 2019). This study focuses on the choices for further education of Hong Kong local students who have finished their secondary education. Student choice among the tertiary education institutions to enter the Bachelor's degree was studied; thus post-graduate degrees were excluded in this study. Hong Kong students have abundant choices for their higher education. At present,

Hong Kong has 19 local degree-awarding higher education institutions, 8 of them being University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded (government funded), and another 11 are locally-based institutions which are self-funded; thus there are more than 700 full-time Bachelor's degree program choices available. Programs include arts and humanities, social work, business, education, law, journalism, music, language, fashion design, and engineering, among others (Education Bureau, 2019). Apart from these higher education institutions which offer local degree programs, students can also choose a Higher Diploma or associate degree program, which usually needs two years of full-time study, and then they can apply for a top-up degree program offered by local or overseas universities. Among the various undergraduate programs available, this study focuses on hospitality- and tourism- related programs in Hong Kong. The full-time undergraduate programs covered in the study are confined to programs with at least one of the following key words in the program name: catering, event, festival, gaming, hospitality, hotel, leisure, MICE, recreation, travel, and tourism. Current undergraduate students were sampled for the study. Interviews were arranged with current undergraduate students who were studying in hospitality and tourism-related programs.

In terms of study design, this is an exploratory qualitative primary research study, based on semi-structured in-depth group interviews with Hong Kong hospitality and tourism undergraduate students by a purposive sampling technique. Exploratory research aims to gather preliminary information for a problem that has not been clearly defined; through the research, a better defined problem, clearer concepts, or an explanatory relationship becomes available (Stebbins, 2001). Bryman and Bell (2011) suggested that interview is probably the most common research method used for qualitative study. Group interview permits the interviewer to get a broader scope of knowledge and experience by sharing conversations among the interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The reason for employing a qualitative inductive approach to the research within this higher education sector is due to the absence of established theory for testing, and little is known; therefore, it is the most appropriate to conduct such exploratory research (Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

The research instrument consists of a list of open-ended questions to investigate the decision factors among the students when choosing their higher education institutions and programs. The nature of the semi-structured interview allows flexibility for the interviewer to use different wording or question sequence to probe for more answers in an interview; thus the list is used as

a guideline and for indication when conducting the interviews. The interview consists of open-ended questions with the majority of questions set in an inductive manner to investigate the factors in affecting the students' choice in selecting higher education program and institution.

In terms of data collection, this study looked for data saturation for sampling, and a target sample size of 10 to 22 interviews was set. The concept of data saturation is the point at which no new information is obtained from additional interviews. Prior empirical research suggested that samples of 12 may be appropriate in cases where data saturation occurs among a relatively homogeneous population (Boddy, 2016; Guest et al., 2006). There were a total of 22 full-time hospitality and tourism degree programs in Hong Kong offered by 10 higher education institutions as of 2016. The target sample size of 10 was set by inviting at least one student for an interview from each institution which offers similar hospitality and tourism degree programs in Hong Kong and a maximum of 22 interviews was set as maximum target in which at least one student was invited from each available program. A total of 13 qualitative in-depth semi-structured group interviews were successfully conducted and audio recorded from March to July in 2016, with a total of 41 students, by purposive sampling. These samples represented 8 higher education institutions and 12 different hospitality and tourism full-time Bachelor programs in Hong Kong, which covered 55% of the complete available UGC funded and self-financed full-time hospitality and tourism Bachelor degree programs and 73% of the relevant higher education institutions in Hong Kong. The Framework Method (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) and NVivo were used to assist in evaluation of the relative importance of each decision factor. The profile summary of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the consumer buyer decision model (Kotler, 1965), diverse rationales in choosing the programs and institutions for higher education were found among the interviewed students. It is found that dissimilar marketing efforts play prominent roles in different decision-making stages from the first stage of need recognition through the last stage of post-purchase evaluation.

Need Recognition

Students recognized their needs for further advancement in their studies and to pursue a bachelor degree, the ultimate intention being to seek more opportunities

Table 1. Profile summary of the interviewees.

| Name of university | Degree | Awarded degree | UGC funded | Interviewees | Year | Gender |
|---|---|----------------|------------|--------------|----------|----------------------|
| The Chinese University of Hong Kong | BBA Hotel and Tourism Management | Local | Yes | 4 | Year 1-3 | 3 Males 1 Female |
| The Hong Kong Polytechnic University | BSc (Hons) Hotel Management | Local | Yes/No | 4 | Year 4 | 4 Female(s) |
| The Hong Kong Polytechnic University – School of Professional Education and Executive Development | BA (Hons) in Hospitality Management | Local | No | 5 | Year 4 | 3 Males 2 Females |
| Vocational Training Council – Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong | Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Hotel Operations Management | Local | No | 6 | Year 1 | 1 Male 5 Females |
| City University of Hong Kong – School of Continuing and Professional Education | BA/BA (Hons) Hospitality and Service Management | Overseas | No | 4 | Year 3/4 | 2 Males 2 Females |
| The Chinese University of Hong Kong – School of Continuing and Professional Studies | Bachelor of Business (Event Management) | Overseas | No | 4 | Year 3/4 | 3 Males 1 Female |
| The Chinese University of Hong Kong – School of Continuing and Professional Studies | Bachelor of Business (Hotel Management) | Overseas | No | 4 | Year 3/4 | 2 Male 2 Females |
| The University of Hong Kong – School of Professional and Continuing Education | BSc (Hons) Hospitality Management/Tourism Management | Overseas | No | 2 | Year 3/4 | 2 Females |
| Vocational Training Council – School of Higher and Professional Education | BSc (Hons) Hospitality Business Management | Overseas | No | 5 | Year 3/4 | 5 Females |
| Vocational Training Council – School of Higher and Professional Education | BA(Hons) International Hospitality and Tourism Management | Overseas | No | 3 | Year 3/4 | 1 Male 2 Females |

and better development for their future careers. Some of them recognized their own higher education needs and chose the programs and institutions according to their own personal interests, whilst some were stimulated by role models, and some were prompted or reminded by others such as family, colleagues, classmates, or friends. Students who have clear career goals in the hospitality and tourism industry revealed that they want to practice the skills they will learn in their higher education. These practical skills include operations skills at front office or in food and beverage sections, language skills, and more advanced skills such as various management and problem-solving skills. These career goals set by the students could be explained by their own personal interest and also by a realistic view that the industry has plenty of job vacancies and they chose the hospitality and tourism field as their career goal in consequence of this.

At this stage of need recognition, both tangible and intangible elements of product strategy play important roles in students' choice, and promotion strategy helps to communicate these elements to these potential customers. The tangible Bachelor degree certificate and the intangible benefits of employability from a degree were of distinct importance to all the interviewees. The findings reaffirmed previous literature about these critical factors in choosing higher education among students who are looking for intangible benefits from the product that are related to employment outcome, such as future employability and better career advancement opportunities (Misran et al., 2012; Polat, 2012; Tas & Ergin, 2012). Moreover, content of advertisements can help students to visualize the intangible benefits. The images shown in the advertisements could imprint into some students' minds. For example, one student could recall clearly the image of an outdoor banner he had seen, saying, "the banner has a big picture of a graduating student who is wearing a graduation gown, hood and cap, and next to it says 'work ready' with the logo of the institution. That is exactly what I want, to obtain a degree and eventually to get a job." This reaffirmed Raj et al. (2013) on the importance of use of strategic advertising among higher education institutions.

Information Search

After realizing the need for a Bachelor degree, students then proceed to the second stage in the decision-making process: information search. Marketing promotion efforts play an important role in disseminating information. Promotion strategies such as events, personal selling, and direct marketing are most prominent in the findings. The findings verified the importance of campus visits and open days in influencing students' selection of

their future education (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Moogan, 2011). According to the findings, public relations events such as school talks, open days, campus visits, and information days, together with personal selling are exceptionally influential and effective in persuading students from early stages of information search to alternative evaluation stage. Interviewees showed great interest and were favorably impressed by the special hospitality training facilities visit (such as training hotel, restaurant, and wine lab). In addition, personal selling is tied in with events, where face-to-face encounters with the institutions' staff and/or students affect students' decision making during the alternative evaluation stage. Campus visits that include the unique training facilities of the hospitality and tourism discipline can give long-term memories, potentially leaving a good impression in these future students' minds. Senior students and alumni could have a major influence on the students' decisions. They may be able to act as role models for these young adults, helping them to envisage their own future after graduation by mirroring from their senior classmates. Students might be able to interact with them on occasions such as school seminars, open days, and information days:

This program seminar did not give me any solid impression until the speech given by an alumna from my secondary school. She studied in the same program and worked in a hotel as intern, she is very professional and presentable in the talk. She enjoys her present hotel work a lot and being very positive.

The most impressive part was the sharing session by the graduates, there was a girl standing on stage giving a speech and shares her own experience of her previous study and work, she is now working for a five-star hotel, and she has joined the exchange program and internship ... That sharing part really moved me.

There were two students who have been to an exchange program, standing on the stage and shared their experiences. I felt that they are so presentable, how they talk, how they pose and how they dress, they are so professional, and I was very impressed. I thought if I study there, will I become someone like them being so presentable.

Furthermore, direct marketing via the institutions' official websites and the dissemination of printed materials about the institution and the programs are beneficial and useful for the purpose of information searching. Printed materials such as brochures given out in seminars as well as the information from the official websites play relatively important roles in disseminating relevant information about the institutions and the programs to these potential students. These findings reiterated the conclusions of Simoes and Soares (2010), Gomes and

Murphy (2003), and Veloutsou et al. (2005), who agreed that university websites were major sources and the most reliable information source for university selection, whilst advertising is treated as a less reliable source, which also aligned with the results of Bonnema and van der Waldt (2008).

Alternative Evaluation

Alternative evaluation is the third stage in the purchase decision process after gathering information. Students tend to evaluate higher education alternatives in terms of all 7Ps except promotion, as they already received the information from varied promotion channels earlier during the information search. The remaining Ps are: product (program content and duration, future employability), price (tuition fee), place (campus locations and accessibility), physical evidence (campus environment and facilities), people (teaching staff and other students), and process (administration and application procedure). It was found that the administration policy and the application procedure of these institutions play a prominent role in students' higher education final decision. The entire procedure from application to enrollment confirmation happens within a few months. Most students during that period felt worry and anxiety, being unsure if their applications would be successful. All of the interviewed students appeared to have an urgent need of a sense of security and assurance and wanted to settle their higher education choice as soon as possible; thus eventually most of them took the first offer they received in order to have peace of mind. Institutions which offered supportive, simple, and transparent procedures, and early confirmation, attracted more students to apply, whereas other institutions discouraged students from joining their programs by demanding onerous document proofs from students, conducted poorly managed interviews, were slow in responding, or had poor application logistics.

Regarding the product and price, students preferred programs which are cheaper and faster to complete. Some students were concerned as to whether the program was ratified for Government loan or grant. The findings were consistent with other scholars' conclusions. Both Kotler and Fox (1985) as well as Briggs and Wilson (2007) pointed out the costs and benefits elements in pricing, and they considered that cost should be treated as a package by including not only tuition fees, but should also include other related elements such as time cost, loans, and scholarships.

Briggs (2006) and Polat (2012) in their studies stated that the campus location is an important factor, while Raj et al. (2013) found that urban is more appealing than rural in terms of campus location. However, place is not an important factor for most of the students in Hong Kong according to our findings. This is contrary to the research outcomes of Briggs (2006) and Shanka et al. (2006), who found that proximity and distance from home comprise a top factor in influencing undergraduate students' choice. This may be because Hong Kong is a place with high population density, small size, and with good public transport system (Cullinane, 2003), where most places can be reached within 1 hour, and thus the campus location and accessibility are not of major concern to Hong Kong students.

The factor of teaching staff was not considered important, as shown in the findings. This finding differed from Babad and Tayeb (2003) and Voss et al. (2007) who observed that students show high concern about the lecturers' styles, whether they are knowledgeable, approachable, and have a rapport with the students. Hong Kong students stated that consideration of teaching staff is not a main concern in their decision. Most of them pointed out that they trust the institutions are providing good quality teaching staff, and all teachers are delivering the same module contents to them with little variation. Students believe the programs are well-established with standard modules and conventional syllabus; thus who delivers the module materials is not of their major concern. Some students had a quick check of the teaching staff from the institutions' websites, but they confirmed it does not really matter to them. However, people within that institution (such as the university president, and other students from the same institution) play an important role during the alternative evaluation stage, as these people generate either positive or negative impressions and perceptions in prospective students. The findings indicated that students tend to stereotype various students' behavior and character from different institutions, and they prefer to study in an institution where other students match with their own personality and character, and share similar

Table 2. Examples of perceptions toward students of different institutions.

| Institutions | Perceptions of students' characters |
|--------------|--|
| CUHK | + very philosophical and more down to earth + usually wear T-shirts and flip flops at campus + well-behaved and obedient, genuine and unpretentious + smart and with good language skills - too academic |
| PolyU | + practical and not too academic + career-oriented - always dress up and put on make-up - poor in language skills |
| HKUST | - aggressive - always need to compete with each other - high suicide rate |

standards and levels. Table 2 shows some examples of students' perceptions toward other students from different institutions. The findings confirmed the service encounter model by Bitner (1990) that the service experience is affected by not only the service provider but also by interactions with other customers (students in this case). Some students were impressed by the nice, polite, friendly, outgoing senior students they met during the open days, admission talks, or interviews, gaining "a feeling that this place is very good, the people here are so nice and friendly, it must be a great experience if I have a chance to study here." On the contrary, students decided not to consider the institutions where they think the students have poor language ability and lower standards. As stated by Wu (2008) and Huang (2008), the customer-to-customer interactions can impose either positive or negative satisfaction, and it may lead to negative results if other customers (students in this case) have observable differences (Grove & Fisk, 1997).

Physical evidence is not an important factor for Hong Kong students, whilst other studies have reported different results. Dumitrascu and Serban (2013) found that "good facilities" and "university atmosphere" ranked the second and the third in their study. That the factor of physical evidence does not have a high ranking in the study may be due to the circumstance that the majority of higher education institutions in Hong Kong do not have a spacious campus, but that most of the campuses are close to crowded commercial or residential districts, and all of them provide similar basic university facilities such as classrooms, food service, libraries, and sports facilities to students.

Purchase Decision and Post Purchase Evaluation

Process again plays a very important role in the purchase decision stage for most students. Assurance and early confirmation of the offer is very important. Some students neglect other interviews or offers when they have received an early confirmation from one of their pre-selected institutions. The findings align with previous literature that students prefer a transparent, hassle-free education service process (Raj et al., 2013), especially for the enrollment process, and the importance of the speed of responses, as students felt frustrated if it took them too long to receive the result of their application (Brown et al., 2009). One student stated "the school indicated that they can give me an offer, so why I still shop around? I take the offer immediately. I don't want to think twice at all."

The findings reaffirmed that the consequences of such efficiencies in the enrollment service process could be rather extreme; either an institution could successfully

recruit the right candidate if the enrollment process was prompt and well-defined, or the potential candidate could decline the offer and might create potential negative word-of-mouth if the enrollment process was not correctly handled. During the post-purchase evaluation, any dreadful experience for a student may also bring about long-term negative effects to an institution or program, as students will share bad experiences with acquaintances or online, such as slow response, insufficient transparency, unfair treatment, or impolite interview. This negative word of mouth can affect other possible future applicants.

Conclusions

This study investigates the factors that influence students in choosing hospitality and tourism Bachelor degree programs based on the 5-stage consumer decision-making process model, and the 7Ps of the marketing mix. Among the 7Ps, the findings align with the previous literature with several exceptions. Similar factors such as product, promotion, process, and price are major concerns among Hong Kong undergraduate students. Nonetheless, certain marketing factors are dissimilar to those in previous studies, and are found not to be important to Hong Kong students, these factors include distance from home, physical facilities, and people in terms of teaching faculty.

The research findings revealed that marketing efforts facilitate students' choice in higher education in various ways which may help alleviate the skilled manpower shortage problem in the industry. These approaches can be as follows: (1) arranging school talks to different secondary schools, providing comprehensive information and contact, and organizing visits and tours for secondary school students to experience the special facilities such as training hotel and training restaurant; (2) effective personal selling by inviting senior students or alumni to share their first-hand experience in internship, exchange program, or their career lives after graduation; (3) assurance to students by giving clear announcements of application dates, requirements, and procedures, providing early confirmation of the offer to the applicants; give hyperlink to official website showing government qualification framework structure to assure the recognition of the degree; and showing alumni testimonials during the info day and via various media such as official websites, notifications to secondary schools, and advertisements; (4) illustrate the tangible benefits to enable the students to envisage a bright future and career. Powerful images of graduates in their graduation gowns and hats, and well-groomed alumni in hotel or

airline uniforms in commercials and advertisements will easily imprint in most potential customers' minds.

This study is novel and has several practical implications. It contributes to the growing body of literature on hospitality and tourism educational study and the factors involved in higher education decision-making from a marketing strategic angle as well as from the consumer perspective. From a theoretical perspective, this study fills a research gap by identifying the key factors in student decision-making for higher education, focusing on hospitality and tourism undergraduate students in Hong Kong, through bringing the idea of the marketing mix into a higher education context. From a managerial perspective, this provides insights for tertiary education institutions to effectively allocate resources to attract the most suitable candidates to enroll in their programs and hence join the future skilled workforce in the hospitality and tourism industry. In terms of educational contributions, the study endorses the uniqueness of higher education in the hospitality and tourism discipline; the reasons revealed for choosing a degree program were not the same as for other undergraduate degrees. For instance, the sharing of industry work experience by alumni, and guided tours to facilities and career-related workplace settings such as training hotel rooms, wine labs, and training restaurants, provided potential students a visual image for their future career and thus helped to arouse their interest.

This study may have several limitations. The nature of qualitative research is that it makes no attempt to generalize the findings, and the researcher usually has high involvement in all stages of research, from research design, data collection such as from interviews, to data coding and analysis, and interpretation (Saunders et al., 2012). Therefore, this study is not able to provide any test of statistical validity, nor generalize the findings to represent a larger population. Moreover, the application of the study findings may be limited to the undergraduate students in the hospitality and tourism discipline in Hong Kong and may not be suitable to explain the students' choices in other disciplines.

It is suggested that future research, based on these findings, can further compare varied cultural settings, and different academic structures and systems in various regions and countries using either qualitative and/or quantitative approaches. Other factors that this study has not investigated in detail such as the age, industry experience of potential candidates, post-study evaluation, satisfaction level, and future career development, can be further explored in future research. It is believed that, by doing so, a more complete understanding of the entire decision-making process and the dominating factors that contribute to the resultant decisions can be found.

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