How Parents and Friends Influence Student Preference in Selecting a Bachelor's Degree in Hotel and Tourism Management in Hong Kong

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Keywords:	Abstract.
Higher education, Decision-making, Word-of-mouth, Influencer, Confucianism and collectivism	This study looks at the decision-making in selecting a higher education programme from a consumer behaviour perspective, and examines who influence students when making the decision on which hospitality and tourism Bachelor's degree to pursue. Qualitative focus group interviews with current undergraduate students were conducted. The findings show that the most significant influencers are 'friends and classmates' followed by 'family' then 'teachers', while the cultural influence of Confucianism and collectivism might be the underlying basis for the decision process. Thus, higher education institutions can act accordingly based on these influences to achieve higher enrolment for their programmes.

Kata Kunci:	Abstrak.
Pendidikan tinggi, Pengambilan keputusan, Dari mulut ke mulut, Influencer, Konfusianisme, dan kolektivisme	*Studi ini melihat pengambilan keputusan dalam memilih program pendidikan tinggi dari perspektif perilaku konsumen, dan meneliti siapa yang mempengaruhi mahasiswa ketika membuat keputusan untuk mengejar gelar Sarjana perhotelan dan pariwisata. Wawancara kelompok fokus kualitatif dengan mahasiswa sarjana saat ini dilakukan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa influencer yang paling signifikan adalah 'teman dan teman sekelas' diikuti oleh 'keluarga' kemudian 'guru', sedangkan pengaruh budaya Konfusianisme dan kolektivisme mungkin menjadi dasar yang mendasari proses pengambilan keputusan. Dengan demikian, institusi pendidikan tinggi dapat bertindak sesuai berdasarkan pengaruh ini untuk mencapai pendaftaran yang lebih tinggi untuk program mereka.*

1.   Introduction

The Hong Kong hospitality and tourism industry is facing a serious skilled manpower shortage (HKET, 2014; FHKHO, 2012), and the best way to meet the manpower needs of the industry is through training and education (International Labour Office, 2010). In fact, this phenomenon of shortage of skilled talent is a global issue in the hotel and tourism industry. WTTC (2015) shows 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 contribution to global GDP by US$610 billion over the next ten years. Examples of countries reporting such worries are Canada (TWIG, 2015), Australia (AusTrade, 2015), India (Barot, 2012), and Singapore (Singapore Tourism Board, 2015).

Industry practitioners over the world are anticipating the entry of more fresh graduates into the industry to help reduce this workforce shortage issue. However, students have abundant choices for their higher education. Statistics show that, among all the 37,440 first year intake students of full-time locally accredited self-financing programmes in 2014-2015, only 3,843 or 10% of them chose a hospitality and tourism discipline (CSPE, 2015). Traditionally, all schools target only to students

themselves in promotion campaigns, although these students are the end-users or consumers, are they the 'buyer' and 'the sole decision-maker'? Are there other targets the schools need to focus on when promoting their programmes? Thus, this study investigates if there are influencers that induce students to seek and choose degree programmes in hospitality and tourism in Hong Kong. This study can lead to certain practical contributions; from the research findings, recommendations can be made to higher education institutions of ways to attract additional enrolment in their hospitality and tourism disciplines, so that the skilled workforce shortage problem in the industry can be alleviated.

In fact, the topic of higher education choice has been widely covered in the literature, although limited attention has been given to social influence when discussing student choice of higher education (Krezel & Krezel, 2017). Previous studies have covered internal factors such as motivation and personality (Shanka, *et al.*, 2006; Misran *et al*, 2012; Moogan *et al.*, 1999), as consumers (Woodall, *et al*, 2014; Magrath, 1986), as well as external factors such as marketing mix (Tas & Ergin, 2012; Gajic, 2012; Ho & Law, 2020). Some have focused on Asian students and some on European students (Polat, 2012). Most studies ignore the fact that peers and friends may act as strong influencers or blockers of these students' decisions, and parents sometimes are not only influencers but also the decision-makers and buyers who make the final choice of programme and pay the tuition fee, whilst students themselves are the end-user or consumer in this decision-making and purchase process. Thus, marketers need to recognise that appealing only to consumers may be too narrow a strategy, because other participants may play different decision-making roles (Hoyer *et al.*, 2018). However, there is no single study thus far focusing on parent and peer influence on student decisions in choosing hospitality and tourism programmes in higher education. Therefore, this study has potential theoretical contributions to bridge the research gap by looking into these social influences on decision-making of hospitality and tourism undergraduate students in an Asian population.

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   *Social Influence*

The consumer behaviour discipline involves individuals who play various critical roles in a decision-making process: the consumer or end-user; the buyer or purchaser; the decision-maker; and the reference groups (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015; Hoyer *et al.*, 2018). In terms of an undergraduate programme, the students are the consumer or the end-user who undertake the programme; whilst the parents are mostly the buyer who pays the tuition fee; the decision-makers are the individuals who made the final decision (it could be the students or their parents); and the reference groups can be parents, classmates or friends, and former teachers with whom the students are acquainted (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017).

Consumers are affected and often inspired by reference groups or influencers. Top influencers can be everyday acquaintances who recognise one's need and share information (Goldsmith, 2015). Reference groups such as family members and peers may influence young adults' decisions. According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015), reference groups are groups that serve as frames of reference for individuals in their consumption decisions. Reference groups are perceived as credible sources for comparison, influence, and norms for consumers' perceptions and resultant behaviours. Different reference groups may influence the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals at different times or under different circumstances. Among all the reference groups, family is the most influential, because it provides children with the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences necessary to function as consumers (Ward, 1974).

There is evidence that parents influence children in choosing among higher education institutions, programmes, and career plans. Wilkins and Huisman (2015) did a quantitative study on high school students in UAE and discovered that the personal relationship and recommendations from parents

and relatives are very influential to potential university students. Wong and Liu (2010) did a quantitative study within five cities in China to examine hospitality and tourism students and tested parental influences on their future career choices. The study found that parents strongly influence these students' choice intention on aspects such as career concerns, parental support, or parental barriers to career choice. Also, an absence of parental support can be viewed as a barrier to a particular career choice. To the contrary, an increase of support from parents may decrease student perception of such barriers. HKET (2015) reported similarly that Hong Kong parents made decisions on behalf of their children in choosing university as well as future career; and at the same time forbade them to choose particular disciplines. However, there is an overall absence of qualitative academic research on parental influence in choosing an undergraduate programme.

Besides the influence from parents, peers may also affect higher education choices. Bain and Anderson (1974) reviewed research on high school students in the United States and found that there are peer influences for college plans, as students want to share the same opinions and values as their peers, the peers are those with whom they spend most time, and as a result of friendships students desire to attend the same college as the friends. Owen and Jensen (2004) surveyed students from 60 classes in Arts, Humanities, Science and Social Science disciplines in their college in the United States and found that higher education students use the experience and information gathered from their peers to help inform their decision and advice from peers has a strong influence in selecting college courses. Sacerdote (2001) found that students are influenced by their college roommates; evidence showed the existence of peer effects in student outcomes such as GPA impacts and choice of college major among roommates in the United States. Han and Li (2009) did a quantitative study in China and confirmed the existence of peer effects in academic achievement in higher education on female students, as females responded to peer influences, whereas male students did not. Davies and Kandel (1981) studied the importance of parental and peer influences on adolescents' educational plans in secondary schools in New York by using questionnaires and found that parents are considerably more dominant than peers.

These previous studies provide some insights and evidence that parents and peers may influence student decisions. This paper thus investigates if family and/or peers impact the decision of choosing a hospitality and tourism higher education degree in Hong Kong.

2.2. *Word-of-mouth*

Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015) defined word-of-mouth (WOM) as transmission of advice and other types of information about products, services, brands, and shopping experiences. In most cases WOM is positive feedback from satisfied customers, but it can also be negative. It is impossible to control WOM communications. Negative comments, frequently in the form of untrue rumours, can sweep through the marketplace and undermine a product. In the education context, studies found that positive WOM is very effective in marketing higher education services (Raj *et al.*, 2013). Chang *et al.* (2013) studied undergraduate students in Malaysia and confirmed there is a positive relationship between satisfaction and WOM in education services; positive WOM implies good service quality thus can induce the subsequent consumers' behaviour. Duhan *et al.* (1997) found that there are two types of WOM: strong-tie sources (friends and family) and weak-tie sources (acquaintances or strangers). Consumers are more likely to seek recommendations from strong-tie sources when they perceive great difficulty in the decision and when they lack prior knowledge. Le *et al.* (2020) studied Vietnamese students and found that 'teachers and school advisors' and 'siblings and relatives' are important WOM sources in choosing their domestic universities.

This study intends to examine whether WOM imposes any positive or negative impact on the student decision in choosing a hospitality and tourism Bachelor's degree in Hong Kong.

2.3.   Cultural Influence

Student decisions may also be affected by cultural differences. Underlying the cultural diversity that exists among countries are fundamental differences in cultural values. Hong Kong students who grew up in a collectivist and Confucian society may lack individualistic characteristics in making their higher education decision. They may tend to obey what they are told by their parents and follow the peer consensus.

According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2010), culture can only be used meaningfully by comparison, as all dimensions are relative. They suggested six dimensions in national culture, namely, power distance; individualism versus collectivism; masculinity versus femininity; uncertainty avoidance; long-term orientation; and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010). Asian countries including Hong Kong tend to score higher for power distance, tend to have more collectivist societies, show more restraint than in Western countries, which have lower power distance, are more individualistic and have higher values for indulgence.

Some previous studies affirmed that cultural differences affect higher education learning. Cheung and Chan (2010) compared these national dimensions with education in different countries and found that uncertainty avoidance, power distance and individualism have significant influences relating to higher education. Countries with lower scores in uncertainty avoidance and power distance; and higher scores in individualism tend to score higher in education system, knowledge transfer and university education. Colvin *et al.* (2014) studied cultural diversity in higher education and found that how students see and understand other cultures relate to their actual intercultural interaction experience either positively or negatively. Marambe *et al.* (2012) suggested that there are great differences in learning patterns, learning strategies, and learning environments between Asian and European students. Sawitri *et al.* (2014) confirmed a strong parental influence toward adolescents' career aspirations and planning in a collectivist society, adolescents from a collectivist society such as Indonesian high school students are likely to consider parents' wishes when taking career-related actions.

Collectivism may also play an important role in influencing the young adults' decisions. Mann *et al.* (1998) affirmed that collectivistic Asian students (Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan) showed less confidence in their decision-making ability when compared to more individualistic Western university students. Brew *et al.* (2001) found that Chinese high school students exhibit more collectivist tendencies in decision choices and reasons for choice and score higher on avoidant, complacent, and hypervigilant decision styles when compared to Anglo students.

Besides collectivism, Confucian thinking may also affect students' major decisions. Yeh and Bedford (2004) suggested that in Confucian society, the concept of filial piety is important; children are expected to obey, honour and respect their parents, and parents are expected to love their children. It is the childrens' responsibility to avoid conflict, and never to act against their parents' wishes even when they disagree with their decisions. Relatives, friends, and teachers all contribute to socialising children with the norms of filial piety. Students socialise each other with peer pressure, and harshly judge those who fail to live up to society's norms.

Choi and Nieminen (2013) pointed out the importance of Confucian attitudes among all East Asian originated international students. Students tend to obey their seniors such as parents and teachers and authorities. Confucianism has a major impact on students' educational experience and their and their families' expectations, both directly on education and on family responsibilities in an indirect way. Students usually rely on family psychological and financial support; a successful entry to a high-prestige university is seen as a victory for the family, and failure to do so is seen as shameful. Lee and Morrish (2012) studied Chinese students who studied abroad and found that their decision-making process is strongly influenced by traditional values rooted in Confucianism.

However, there is no previous study focusing on Hong Kong students' decision-making in choosing their undergraduate programme in local universities. This study thus examines if the collectivistic and Confucian culture in Hong Kong affects students in selecting an undergraduate programme in hospitality and tourism.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Measurement*

This study is an exploratory qualitative primary research study, with semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews with Hong Kong hospitality and tourism undergraduate students, by purposive sampling technique. The full-time undergraduate programmes covered in the study are confined to programmes with at least one of the following key words in the programme 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 programmes.

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). 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 in a higher education sector study is because there is an absence of established theory for testing, and only a little is known, therefore it is the most appropriate to conduct such exploratory research (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). The study has no intent to provide generalisation nor representativeness of the findings in this qualitative study, as such is not a purpose of qualitative research (Larsson, 2009). The research instrument consists of a list of open-ended questions (Table 1) to investigate the decision-making factors among students when choosing their higher education institutions and programmes. The nature of open-ended questions allows flexibility for the focus group moderator to use different wording or question sequence to probe for more answers, thus the list is used a guideline and for indication when conducting the focus group interviews. The focus group interview consists of open-ended questions with the majority of questions set in inductive manner to investigate the factors in affecting the students' choice in selecting higher education programme and institution.

Table 1. Focus Group Interview Semi-structured Open-ended Questions

1. Can you tell me about your experiences in choosing this degree programme and institution?
2. By what time or at what stage had you finally decided to choose this programme? - Anyone or anything affected your choice?
3. Since what time did you first know about this programme and institution? - Where you get this information? Did anyone you know give you that information or you got it from online etc.?
4. What are the reasons you chose this programme and institution? - Was there a second choice before your final decision?
5. What are the aspects you like about this programme and institution?
6. Are there any concerns you have, that put you off choosing other programmes and institutions that you have considered?
7. [recap all the possible reasons], among all the reasons you have mentioned that affect your choices, which are the most critical reasons that affect your final choice? - Why is it so?

There were a total of 22 full-time hospitality and tourism degree programmes in Hong Kong offered by different higher education institutions. The population of interest was all the intake students who enrolled into these degree programmes in the academic year 2015. A target sample size of 10 to 22 focus group interviews was set for this study. The target of 10 sample size was set by inviting at least one focus group from each institution which offers similar hospitality and tourism degree programmes in Hong Kong; and 22 focus group interviews was set as maximum target in which at least one group of students was invited from each available programme, or until data saturation has been reached. In other words, more students would be invited for focus group interviews if there was not enough information (Fusch and Ness, 2015). As a result, 13 qualitative in-depth semi-structured focus group interviews which covered 12 full-time hospitality and tourism Bachelor's degree programmes were conducted and audio recorded. A total of 41 students were interviewed within the five months between March and July 2016 in Hong Kong. The samples were picked in a non-probabilistic manner, and purposive sampling technique was used. These 13 transcripts were then transcribed with the use of Microsoft Word, and then imported to NVivo software for coding and analysis. The Framework Method was adopted in the analysis to evaluate the relative importance of each decision factor.

The Framework Method was developed by Ritchie and Spencer in 1980s. This analytical method consists of five stages, namely, familiarisation; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and mapping and interpretation. According to Brunt (1977), the Framework Method can provide a systematic way to analyse qualitative data, and it is one of the most suitable for thematic analysis of recorded contextual data, particularly interview transcripts, it can produce themes by comparing within and between cases. Data can be compared and contrasted by themes across cases and transcripts, at the same time, each perspective in the context can be retained and connected to other aspects and data set. The method enables the researcher to inductively reconsider and rework ideas, it involves the systematic process of filtering, charting and organising material into relevant themes; a structured overview can be created in a matrix format which is derived from the summarised data (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). However, the limitations of this analysis method are that it still heavily relies on the researcher to determine meanings, make judgement, and conceptualise before data can be 'lifted' from their initial context and be interpreted and defined at later stages (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

4.   Result

4.1.   *Profile of Participants*

A total of 13 qualitative in-depth semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted. Undergraduates (41) from 12 full-time hospitality and tourism Bachelor's degree programmes and 8 different higher education institutions in Hong Kong were interviewed, which covered 55% of the complete available full-time hospitality and tourism Bachelor's degree programmes and 73% of the concerned higher education institutions in Hong Kong. Of these 37% or 15 interviewees were male and 63% or 26 of them were female students.

4.2.   *Family Influence*

Some students interviewed recognised their own higher education needs, some were prompted by family, while some were inspired from the experience of family members and other role models they have encountered. Those students who did not see their own higher education needs were reminded or prompted by family members particularly parents. Some parents discussed and convinced their offspring to get a degree for better prospects and future.

"I originally did not consider continuing my higher education, but my family has talked to me, they said it is better to advance my study and get a degree."

"My family persuaded and reminded me that I need to have a degree certificate, so I surrendered, for the sake of a Bachelor's degree and my future."

Whereas some parents simply gave out an instruction or 'a command' to their descendants as a 'must do' attainment for a Bachelor's degree.

"My family said I must need to continue the study to get a degree."

"Before I started my Higher Diploma study, my parents already told me that they want me to finish a Bachelor's degree. So if I couldn't get into a local top-up programme, I will most probably need to study abroad to finish my degree."

Family also plays an important role for some of the students. Parents were involved in different levels of the decision-making. Some parents have high involvement and helped make the education decision, these parents attended the institutions' seminars, searched online, and read through the programme brochures in evaluating and comparing the programmes' content, duration, tuition fee, practicality, recognition, and future prospects. Some parents did not have such high involvement and only demanded their children to obtain a degree, preferably an honours degree. Some parents urged their offspring to choose a particular discipline for the sake of a better career in the future. Students tend to treat their parents' advice in serious manner though not all of them followed their parents' wish for their final choice.

4.3. Stimulated from Colleagues and Friends

Some students saw the need for a Bachelor's degree from their own work experiences as well as reminders from their colleagues. These students had worked as part-time staff or as interns during their previous Higher Diploma study.

"I worked as a bell boy in a hotel as student intern as compulsory placement in my last semester, I found out only having a Higher Diploma is not sufficient, all the colleagues around me are having a degree, so I saw the need to get a degree in order to have a better career prospect."

"I have heard from the comments of the colleagues during my internship, they said it is important to get a degree."

Friends also played a role by helping some of these students to make them aware of their options. "My friend said why don't I try applying and see whether I can get in, as there is nothing for me to lose. She said if the institution accepts me then I shall continue my study. I think she is right."

4.4. Word-of-Mouth from Teachers

Students tend to have dissimilar levels of trust towards the information and the word-of-mouth from different informal sources. Students showed a very high level of trust towards their acquaintances such as teachers, classmates and friends, students believed and treated their information and advice in a serious manner. When students are considering the available programmes and higher education institutions, they tend to gather information from various sources, besides the information from official websites, brochures, seminars and advertisements; students tend to listen to their teachers, classmates and friends, who appear to be more reliable from these students' point of view. Meanwhile students treat other informal means such as online chatrooms as supplemental references, and doubt the accuracy and truthfulness.

Students trust and respect their teachers, thus they treat the teachers' advice on their higher education options with very high priority. Highly influential teachers are their secondary school teachers

especially for those who are pursuing a Bachelor's degree directly after their DSE examination, and also the teachers from their previous institutions for students who seek a top-up degree after their Higher Diploma or associate degree.

Teachers play an important role in guiding and assisting their students for their future education and career paths. In terms of long-term memory and positive impressions, students perceived those higher education institutions that came to their secondary school for school talks as being more recognised by the teachers. Students had better and deeper impression of the institutions that their secondary school teachers had brought for campus visits.

When it came to alternative evaluation and purchase stages, teachers had one of the most prominent roles in such decision-making. Most secondary school teachers analysed and suggested among the available institutions and programmes for students according to students' scores, personality, and interests. Lecturers and tutors from students' previous higher education institutions also imposed similar influence by giving higher education suggestions to students. A lot of these students said their teachers were the main reason why they chose that programme or institution, as the teachers had almost decided for them which programme they should apply for, and how they should rank the choices.

Teachers helped in determining students' future career choices. "My secondary school teacher highly appraised that working in hotel industry is good, as we can learn different things and meet with different people, we can serve others, and when others are happy we will feel happy too." For those students who are not sure of what industry they would like to work for, teachers recommended hotel management as they think "it has a broader career path and can provide a good variety of job choices" after they graduate.

The perception of the teachers has substantial influence on the perception of the students towards the discipline and the institutions. Several students made similar statements as "I signed up for the programme because my teacher said this programme is good." Teachers' preferences transferred as students' preferences.

> "My secondary teacher preferred we study at PolyU. My teacher said CU is more academic and PolyU is more practical, so we can equip ourselves for our future career."

> "Teachers said this programme has high recognition. When we go out to look for jobs, employers will recognise this programme more than other programmes."

Amongst these teachers' suggestions and analysis, some could be rational, but some could be subjective and might contain biases. Higher education institutions could take the opportunity to promote their undergraduate programmes through these teachers. The teachers could act as frontline salespersons, providing programme details, persuading customers by stressing the strengths and benefits (Table 2), offering convenience by arranging talks during classes, and present their products more appealingly to these potential customers.

Table 2. Programme Benefits Highlighted by Teachers

This top-up degree programme is a further advancement and continuance of your Higher Diploma
Not all other programmes are recognised by the Government's qualification framework
This top-up degree is an honours degree, it's much better than the ones without
The other programmes by some other institutions need longer duration to finish, but this programme takes only one year
This programme has been running for 7 or 8 years already, it is very well organised
As you are already familiar with the campus and the people, this top-up degree is just located a few levels up in the same building from your Associate Degree
A lot of our previous students took this top-up programme after their Higher Diploma

4.5. *Word-of-Mouth from Classmates and Friends*

Besides teachers' advice, students exhibit high level of trust towards the information given by their ex-classmates and friends. Students tended to seek 'insider' and first-hand experiences from their friends, and former senior classmates who had studied in these programmes already.

Students collect feedback from their friends and tend to choose the recommended programmes. Some of their friends are former classmates from their previous study. "My ex-classmates have relatives and friends studied in this programme, and their feedbacks were ok." "I asked my friends who graduated here for their feedback and they recommended this programme to me. As they have been through the programme, if they say the programme is good, it must be ok, as they don't need to lie to me or trap me. Also, they seem doing fine with their career prospects." "My Higher Diploma ex-classmates who are studying here have shared their study experience and feedback to me before my final decision to take this programme. They said this programme is not very demanding, so I confirmed and paid the tuition fee." Some friends are their colleagues from school internship or from their own part time work in the industry. "I got most of the information from my colleagues during my placement, as they were studying in this institution." "I have colleagues who are also studying here, and they said this programme is ok, they gave me confidence to study here." "My friends said this programme is good, the programme content, learning atmosphere, study workload, future prospect and job seeking opportunities all are proper… I found that all of them are very satisfied, so I signed up for this programme."

Besides their former classmates and friends, students also trust their senior classmates and alumni from the same secondary school who might not necessarily their close friends. Students rely on their insider and first-hand information for their higher education decisions.

> "My senior classmates told me that all of them wish to continue for a top-up degree after Higher Diploma and they said they must try to get in."

> "I trust my senior classmate as she is telling me the first-hand information and real feeling."

> "I got most information about the programme from one senior former classmate and I trust her. She told me the expectations and what I need to prepare psychologically for the programme… So I have quite good understanding of what the programme is about."

> "I have some senior classmates entered this institution for their further study, they came back and provide us more information about their student life there, and that aroused my interests."

Some students who lack such insider information and advice felt regretful and uncertain, "I know only about 50% of this programme before I settle my tuition fee, because I have no insider connection, I don't have any senior classmates from my secondary school took this programme, so I don't know the real experience until I start my study."

Quite a number of students wanted to stay in the same institution due to the good companionship. Most wanted to join the same programme together with their good friends, as some stated that "the learning atmosphere is better when with friends", "I will be more hardworking and willing to learn when studying as a group with my ex-classmates, and "if I have anything I don't understand, I can always ask help from my good friends."

Students' friends and acquaintances have an important influence on their final education decision. Apart from providing insider information on the programmes in the stage of information search, peer preference affects student perception and final choice. Students prefer to continue their education with their friends, also, they trust the senior classmates and colleagues thus they follow the suggestions made by these individuals.

> "Yes, my friends affected my choice. We have discussion among our classmates when in Higher Diploma, my classmates think that this programme is good, so we applied together. I have five classmates in total who we joined this programme together."

> "My classmates have influence on me, they all said this programme is good, and I want to join the same programme with the classmates I knew, I think I can be more hardworking and willing to learn when I am studying as a group with my ex-classmates. It is better for me, so I did not apply for any other programmes, I joined this programme with my ex-classmates from Advanced Diploma."

4.6.   *Underlying Cultural Influence*

Even though no direct question was asked during the focus group interviews if these students were influenced by collectivist mindset or Confucian factors, when the question about 'did anyone or anything affected your choice?', out of all the 41 focus group participants, there were only one student who declared the higher education decision was made solely by herself; the remaining 40 students acknowledged the influences from their parents, former teachers, and their peers.

Collectivist thinking was noticeable by the moderator during the interviews. Students expressed enthusiasm and excitement; some even raised their tones when mentioning their friends during the interviews. These students prefer the programmes that their friends chosen.

> "There are several similar programmes available and I chose this one but not the other ones because all my friends they want to take this one, so I signed up for this programme."

> "I was affected mostly by my friends, as these friends are with me for four years now, we all studied together since Higher Diploma. I am so happy now as I can continue school life with my good friends here. I have a total of 10 friends here, all of us were from the same institution."

> "I know other institutions have better facilities and bigger campus, but these are not my concern, as I just want to continue my study with my good friends together."

Moreover, all students showed high respect to their parents and former teachers. Some students followed their parents' suggestions to avoid upsetting them, which reflects the influence of Confucianism. Some even quoted the exact wording that came from their parents' mouths during the interview when asked about 'anyone affect your choice' of their higher education choices.

> "I have to complete the programme to fulfil my father's and mother's wishes. As they wish me to complete the degree desperately, or my parents will be very upset."

5.   Discussion

This study examines if friends, parents and word-of-mouth influence students' preference when selecting hospitality and tourism Bachelor's degrees in Hong Kong.

Among all the influencers, the findings showed that friends and classmates are the major influencers, followed by family especially their parents, then their former teachers ranked third in affecting students' preference.

The findings show that 'friends' influence' is one of the most important factors affecting student choice. Most interviewees want to continue their higher education together with their friends thus they follow the decisions made by friends. Hong Kong students want to have a sense of security and safety when going to a study environment which is new and strange to them, and the findings about the existence of peer influence on higher education choice are similar to students in the United States (Bain & Anderson, 1974; Owen & Jensen, 2004). This study found that male and female students were both profoundly influenced by their peers; the findings were dissimilar to Han and Li (2009) about the levels of peer influence on different genders.

These findings were different from Wilkins and Huisman (2015) and Wong & Liu (2010) who found parents and relatives have the top influences on their childrens' choice in higher education and career. The findings show that 'family influence' especially parents also play a role in influencing students' decision, and ranks as second most important after friends and classmates. Despite Hong Kong being a westernised and internationalised society, the study affirmed that cultural influences of collectivism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010) and Confucianism (Yeh & Beford, 2004) may still play an important role in such decision. Hong Kong is a collectivist society, and members prefer to take care of each other as a group and accomplish goals collectively (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010). Students want to continue their higher education together with their acquaintances and friends and keep each other company in completing their Bachelor's degrees. The findings are consistent with other Asian students: Indonesian students (Sawitri *et al.*2014); mainland Chinese students (Brew *et al.*, 2001), as well as the students in Japan and Taiwan (Mann *et al.*, 1998). The findings also showed the indications of Confucian thinking among these Hong Kong students. They showed high respect and obedience towards their parents similar to East Asian students (Choi & Nieminen, 2013) as well as mainland Chinese students (Lee & Morrish, 2012).

Another common key attribute among these candidates is the effect of 'word-of-mouth' from teachers, classmates and friends. Among all sources of WOM, students have high level of influence from acquaintances such as former teachers, senior classmates, parents, and friends. The findings matched with Raj *et al.* (2013) and Chang *et al.* (2013) of the effectiveness of WOM in marketing higher education services, where students seek recommendations from strong-tie WOM sources (Duhan *et al.*, 1997). The findings are slightly different from Le *et al.* (2020) that Vietnamese students rank highly the importance of WOM from siblings and relatives, which were not found in this study.

Marketing promotion effort proved not to be of the utmost important in influencing these students, thus higher education institutions which can work on convincing students through their parents, teachers and classmates might gain an effective result in attaining higher enrolment for their programmes. This phenomenon may be due to student trust towards their acquaintances, thus their

information and advice highly influence the undergraduate candidates more than marketing promotion.

6.   Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1   Recommendations

To attract higher enrolment in their hospitality and tourism disciplines and help to alleviate the skilled workforce shortage problem in the industry, universities conventionally targeted only to students themselves in promotion campaigns. Based on these findings, it is suggested that they should not focus their promotion and marketing campaigns exclusively to potential future students, but have to also arouse their influencers attention and interest, such as their parents, peers, and former teachers.

Marketers can disseminate information to the concerned influencers, who can eventually pass the relevant information to the end-users. According to Goldsmith (2015), there are two sequential steps to disseminate information through influencers. Firstly, market influencers must have the ability to diffuse information; and secondly, these influencers must be in the position to move information along by accessing a network of people.

In traditional Confucian society, parents are fully committed to giving the finest education to their children and they are just as, if not more, eager than their children, to collect information about an institution and its offerings (Choi and Nieminen, 2013). Thus, the marketing and promotion messages should be tailor made and modified to suit the different needs of these distinctive audiences. For instance, the communication to parents can emphasise the ability of the institution to provide the best education for their children, the communication to high school teachers can stress the programme content and the factual programme details, while the communication to students can emphasise the ability of the institution to assist them to obtain a Bachelor's degree, and the four-year carefree campus life they will have with their peers.

6.2   Conclusion

This study investigates if there are influencers that induce students to choose higher education institutions and programmes in hospitality and tourism management. The research question is to find out who affects students in selecting among available post-secondary education programmes in hospitality and tourism management in Hong Kong. It is found that 'friends and classmates' followed by 'family' then 'teachers' influence are the most important factors that influence their decisions, while cultural influence of Confucianism and collectivism might be the underlying causes.

From the study, a knowledge gap concerning who influences students' in higher education decision-making can be filled. There is no single previous study with such comprehensive comparable findings; some previous studies suggested 'friends influence', some suggested 'word-of-mouth' and some mentioned 'cultural factors' have influence on Asian high school adolescents or on Asian students who study abroad. The findings can also be beneficial to practitioners. Higher education institutions can tailor make their marketing and communication strategies to these diverse target audiences who act as decision influencers (peers, parents, and former teachers), on top of the students as the end-users or consumers, to promote their programmes to attract more students and gain higher enrolment as an outcome.

There are several limitations to this study. Qualitative research is criticised for its subjective nature; lack of rigour; cannot be generalised; may contain bias; unreliable and invalid (Veal, 2006; Brunt, 1997). Moreover, the sample size and methods have limitations due to the fact that the sampling frame of the known population of interest is wanting in the study. Furthermore, the application of the study has limited scope, thus the findings may be confined to the undergraduate students in

hospitality and tourism discipline in Hong Kong but may not be suitable to explain students' choices in other disciplines or other regions.

It is suggested that future research can be based on this study and further investigate the same theme in varied cultural settings, and different academic structures and systems in various regions and countries, using qualitative and/or quantitative approaches. Other factors that this study has not investigated in detail such as the effect of age differences or prior industry experience on the degree of influence from peers, parents or teachers, can be further explored in future research. It is believed that, by doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of higher education decision-making can be established.

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