Revisiting the antecedents and consequences of internship satisfaction: A study with hospitality & tourism management students from Asia

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Abstract:

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to identify the antecedents affecting Asian students' internship satisfaction; (2) to outline how those identified antecedents dynamically affect Asian students' internship satisfaction; and (3) to examine the potential consequences of internship satisfaction. Drawing on the qualitative data provided by 15 Asian students who are major in hospitality and tourism management, various dimensions of antecedents (e.g., workplace, supervisors, co-workers) are found to jointly and interactively affect Asian students' internship satisfaction. The attainment of internship satisfaction would indirectly affect students' intention to rejoin the industry via confirmation of their expectations towards internships. The person-job fit would also assessed by students before determining their retention intention.

Keywords: Internship satisfaction, retention intention, work-integrated education.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background
As a central component to the curricula of hospitality and tourism management programs, internship has been widely acknowledged as an efficacious experiential learning approach which can prepare students to be industry ready via understanding workplace ethos, acquiring first-hand knowledge, learning other employable skills, and examining theory through practice (Goh & King, 2020; Mensah, Appietu, & Asimah, 2020). Seyitoğlu's (2019) study with gastronomy students from Turkey reports that the internship program did assist students in getting familiar with the hospitality industry in general and the kitchen environment in particular. In another study conducted by Sonnenschein, Barker and Hibbins (2019), the interviewed students suggested that the internship program made them aware of the current needs of the industry and strengthened their passion to work in the industry after graduation. The interviewed hoteliers in Sonnenschein et al.'s (2019) also acknowledged that hotels could benefit via providing internship opportunities to university students, because interns' strong communication and intercultural skills can allow them to serve foreign guests in a better way.

Considering that internship creates much value for students, industry professionals as well as education institutions, numerous studies about internship in hospitality and tourism were conducted in recent years. Diversified topics and issues have been extensively researched like overviewing the internship practices embraced by different universities and institutions (Pusiran, Janin, Ismail, & Dalinting, 2020; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013), examining students' expectations and perceptions towards their internship programs (Ruhanen, Robinson,

& Breakey, 2013; Self, Adler, & Sydnor, 2016), identifying key determinants affecting students' selection of internship employers (Fong, Lee, Luk, & Law, 2014) and many others. Besides the topics listed above, various emerging topics have also been investigated in latest studies such as the efficacy of using ICT in enhancing students' internship preparedness (Wang, Yang, Chen, 2020), the prevalence of sexual harassment happened to hospitality interns and the actions taken by them if harassed (La Lopa & Gong, 2020), as well as the challenges of embracing virtual internship (Bilsland, Nagy, & Smith, 2020).

1.2. Research Gaps
One of the most researched topics pertaining to internship in hospitality and tourism is the examination of antecedents/factors affecting interns' satisfaction with their internship programs (e.g., Chen & Shen, 2012; Hussien & La Lopa, 2018; Ruhanen et al., 2013). Stansbie, Nash and Jack's (2013) study shows that skill variety and task significance can enhance interns' perceived meaningfulness of their work and in turn increase their overall satisfaction with internship program. Hussien and La Lopa's (2018) study reports that job characteristics (e.g., autonomy), personal characteristics (e.g., student self-initiatives) and university support (e.g., university supervisor) are crucial contributors to internship satisfaction. In their recent study, Mensah et al. (2020) empirically verify the positive impact of organizational, supervisor and co-worker supports on hospitality students' internship satisfaction.

While studies exploring antecedents/factors affecting interns' satisfaction with their internship program are not scarce, several knowledge gaps were still un-addressed. First, the participants in prior studies are mostly American, European and other non-Asian students (e.g., Hussien & La Lopa, 2018; Mensah et al., 2020). Besides some notable exceptions like Tse (2010), studies focusing on students studying in Asian institutions are relatively limited. As noted by King and Tang (2020), Asia's hospitality and tourism education grows rapidly in recent years to address the expanded need for human capital of the region. Although numerous hospitality and tourism management students participate in internships every year, limited studies attempted to examine the abovementioned topic from the Asian students' viewpoints.

Second, previous studies on this topic mostly employed the quantitative approach and constrained the scope of factors before the empirical investigation (e.g., Ko, 2008; Lam & Ching, 2007). Undeniably, the use of quantitative and particularly hypothesis testing approach can help understand the relative impact of those selected factors on interns' internship satisfaction. Yet, the use of qualitative approach is more likely to contribute richer knowledge to theory and literature, because more factors as well as the inter-relationship among those identified factors can possibly be identified from the qualitative data shared by the informants (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). In spite of this inherent advantage, qualitative studies on this topic were rarely seen.

Last but not least, although prior studies identified and verified many vital factors which affect hospitality and tourism students' internship satisfaction, previous researchers mostly assume those factors influence internship satisfaction in an additive fashion. According to Doty, Glick, and Huber's (1993) configuration theory, factors seldom influence the outcome independently. Instead, factors often jointly and interactively determine the outcomes of interest. Yet, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no previous studies on this topic have attempted to explore how different factors interactively affect students' internship satisfaction and their retention intentions towards the industry.

1.3. Research Objectives
Through harnessing the qualitative approach and specifically in-depth interviews, this study aims to thoroughly understand how various antecedents interactively affect Asian students' internship satisfaction. To be specific, the objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the antecedents affecting Asian students' internship satisfaction; and (2) to outline how those identified antecedents dynamically affect Asian students' internship satisfaction. To contribute more knowledge to literature on this topic, another objective of this study is: (3) to examine the potential consequences of internship satisfaction. The findings of this study are expected to complement prior studies which are pertinent to internships in hospitality and tourism.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Collection
As noted earlier, this study employs the qualitative approach and specifically in-depth interviews to understand antecedents and consequences of Asian students' internship satisfaction. The target respondents are undergraduate students who are major in hospitality and tourism management and have completed their internship programs recently. The lead and second authors sent emails to all qualified candidates who study in their respective institutions, and invited them to participate in an in-depth interview. Fifteen students accepted the invitation. All of them were majored in hospitality or tourism management, and successfully completed an internship in a hospitality-/tourism-related company prior to the data collection date. The profile of participating interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *Demographic profile of interviewees*

ID	Sex	Place of origin	Internship		
			Type of company	*Division*	*Duration*
P1	F	China	Hotel (international; chain)	Catering	6 months
P2	M	Hong Kong	Hotel (local; chain)	Front Office	3 months
P3	F	Hong Kong	Hotel (international; chain)	Housekeeping	3 months
P4	F	Hong Kong	Hotel (international; chain)	Housekeeping	3 months
P5	F	Hong Kong	Hotel (international; chain)	Catering	3 months
P6	F	Hong Kong	Hotel (local; chain)	Housekeeping	3 months
P7	F	Hong Kong	Aviation (international; chain)	Guest service	6 months
P8	F	Hong Kong	Travel agency (local)	Guest service	6 months
P9	F	Macau	Theme park (international)	Catering	6 months
P10	F	Indonesia	Hotel (international; chain)	Front office	6 months
P11	F	China	Hotel (local; independent)	Human resources	6 months
P12	F	Hong Kong	Hotel (international; chain)	Front office	3 months
P13	M	Hong Kong	Aviation (international; chain)	Guest service	3 months
P14	F	Macau	Hotel (local; chain)	Catering	1 month
P15	F	Taiwan	Hotel (international; chain)	Front office	3 months

Face-to-face interviews were conducted under the authors' moderation, and mobile devices were used to record the interview dialogues for transcription and data analysis. The semi-structured interview mode was adopted to administer the interviews. In short, the interviews were guided by questions relating to their: (1) overall internship experience; (2) overall satisfaction with the internship program; (3) major factors determining the internship satisfaction; and (4) subsequent career planning after completing the internship program. On

average, each interview lasted for around 35 minutes. The dialogue of each interview was transcribed verbatim after completing the conversation. The interview transcripts were reviewed by the corresponding interviewees to avoid any loss of data and inaccurate interpretation.

2.2. Data Analysis

The grounded theory method was utilized to analyze the qualitative data. As illustrated by Corbin and Strauss (2014), the grounded theory method provides researchers with an opportunity *"to examine topics and related behaviors from many different angles- thus developing comprehensive explanations"* (p. 11). Alike other qualitative studies, the lead and second authors firstly read the transcripts multiple times in order to make sense of the data. Afterwards, the two authors separately re-read the transcripts to identify and categorize manifest content. Similar manifest content was also grouped together to derive broader themes. In the final stage, the authors synthesized the themes into a sequential order. A diagrammatic illustration was also prepared to visualize the inter-relationship among all factors/variables mentioned by the interviewees. The data analysis was conducted multiple times to guarantee the reliability. To minimize the personal bias, the two authors conducted the abovementioned steps separately and then cross-compared the results.

3. Results

3.1. Antecedents of Students' Internship Satisfaction

Similar to the findings presented in prior studies (e.g., Chen & Shen, 2012; Hussien & La Lopa, 2018), the Asian students who participating in this study mentioned that several types of antecedents critically affected their internship satisfaction.

Training arrangement, particularly the availability and execution of training schedule, is one type antecedent which were frequently mentioned by many interviewees. P15 reported that her internship experience was not satisfactory because she did not have a proper training schedule. Six interviewees noted that they were not satisfied with their internship programs because the planned training schedule differed from the actual one. P11 reported that the hotel she worked with did not following the original training schedule. P4 also illustrated that she was *"supposed to work in three different divisions every two days"* according to her training schedule. But due to the severe labor shortage problem, she *"could only receive a 2-hour training in each of those three divisions consequently."* Although P14 was delighted to receive many chances to work in different divisions, her overall internship satisfaction was still highly affected by the poor alignment with the pre-determined training schedule. Besides the issues pertinent to training schedule, the availability of sufficient studentship (i.e., salary to student interns) and adequate pre-work training was considered as key antecedents affecting internship satisfaction among Asian students.

Apart from the training arrangement itself, many interviewees described that their corresponding training arrangement was affected due to some issues pertinent to their *supervisors*. P4 said that the quality of training received was negatively affected by her supervisor's *"insufficient working and management experience"*. P15 echoed and added that the mentor appointed by her hotel *"was not a full-time staff but an intern."*

The inherent workload possessed by interns' supervisors was found to a factor affecting supervisors' involvement and dedication to interns' learning experience. P4 sympathized and understood why her supervisors could only devote limited time to coach her and other trainees

because their inherent workload was heavy. P1 and P11 asserted that some full-time employees did grumbled about the heavy workload. As a result, the quality of their internship experience and even their commitment to pursue career in the industry were affected adversely.

Apart from those features about supervisors, *co-workers*' working style and their trust towards interns' capabilities were specified by some interviewees. P5 was not satisfied with her *"unnecessary heavy workload"* because the colleagues who worked in the same restaurant still relied on *"paper and pencil"* to handle reservations, even though the computerized system was in place. P9 recalled that she was unhappy with her internship because the *"senior-dominant"* organizational culture made her and other interns always being blamed by senior staff.

Two interviewees, i.e., P8 and P9, supplemented that full-time staff sometimes did not give many hands-on and practicing opportunities to interns because they often *"depreciated"* interns' capabilities and expressed low level of trust towards them. Due to the lack of learning and training opportunities given by co-workers, their learning efficacy and internship satisfaction were therefore discounted.

Other than those three types of antecedents listed above, many interviewees reported many *workplace-/organization*-related factors would influence students' training arrangement and in turn internship satisfaction. In short, six interviewees underscored that the availability of full-time staff posed both direct and indirect impacts on their training arrangement. P2, P7 and P12 commonly agreed that the labor shortage problem was severe in their companies. P4 echoed and vividly illustrated that *"each room attendant was supposed to make up 16 rooms in one shift, but they were sometimes asked to make up 30 rooms. Since their workload is heavy already, it is understandable that they cannot take time to teach/coach us"*.

The availability of supporting facilities was considered as critical antecedents affecting full-time staff's operational efficiency and interns' learning efficacy. P3 was dissatisfied and disappointed with her affiliated company due to the lack of technologies/supporting systems in place. P10 also stated that the dearth of supporting facilities in the workplace made her failed to work efficiently and enhance self-confidence. Specifically, P10 said that *"when I worked there, the hotel only installed two computers in the Front Office. Adding that the built-in property management system was sometimes out of order, these problems did influence my work and operational efficiency."* The workplace harmony, which refers to the harmonious working atmosphere co-created by employees, was highlighted by four interviewees (i.e., P1, P5, P10. P14) during their interviews. Several interviewees also added that supervisors' and co-workers' morale was highly influenced by the compensation package given by the company and the availability of standard operating guidelines.

To conclude, all interviewees agreed that *workplace*, *supervisors* and *co-workers* interactively affect students' *training arrangement*. The *training arrangement* will in turn affect their overall satisfaction towards the internship program.

3.2. Consequences of Students' Internship Satisfaction
Regarding the potential consequences induced by internship satisfaction, surprisingly, the majority of interviewees asserted that internship satisfaction would indirectly (but not directly) affect their intentions to retain/rejoin the industry after graduation. Four interviewees (i.e., P3, P7, P10, P12) suggested that their satisfactory experience were coherent with their expectancy before the internship commenced. Positive confirmation was achieved due to the pleasant internship, and the positive confirmation did motivate interviewees to re-consider rejoining the

industry or even same company after graduation. By contrast, to those five interviewees (i.e., P1, P4, P13, P14, P15) who received unpleasant internship experience, their experience was in clash with their expectancy. The negative confirmation drove them to consider switching to work in other industries after graduation.

Although many interviewees consented that internship satisfaction would indirectly affect their intention to retain/rejoin the industry via confirmation, two interviewees specified that the person-job fit would firstly be assessed before determining their retention intentions. As described by P8, she was satisfied with her internship experience and her experience was in line with her pre-internship expectancy. However, *"since I recognized that my personality does not "fit" certain types of works (e.g. those work from 9 to 6) after completing my internship, I will therefore change to work in front-of-the-house divisions after the completion of my study."* P9 shared a similar thought. She formerly did not plan to work in the industry prior to the internship. However, *"as the nature of those industries or jobs are incongruent with my personality, I therefore changed to work in the hotel industry now."* Figure 1 graphically summarizes the findings of this research study.

Figure 1. Diagrammatic illustration of research findings
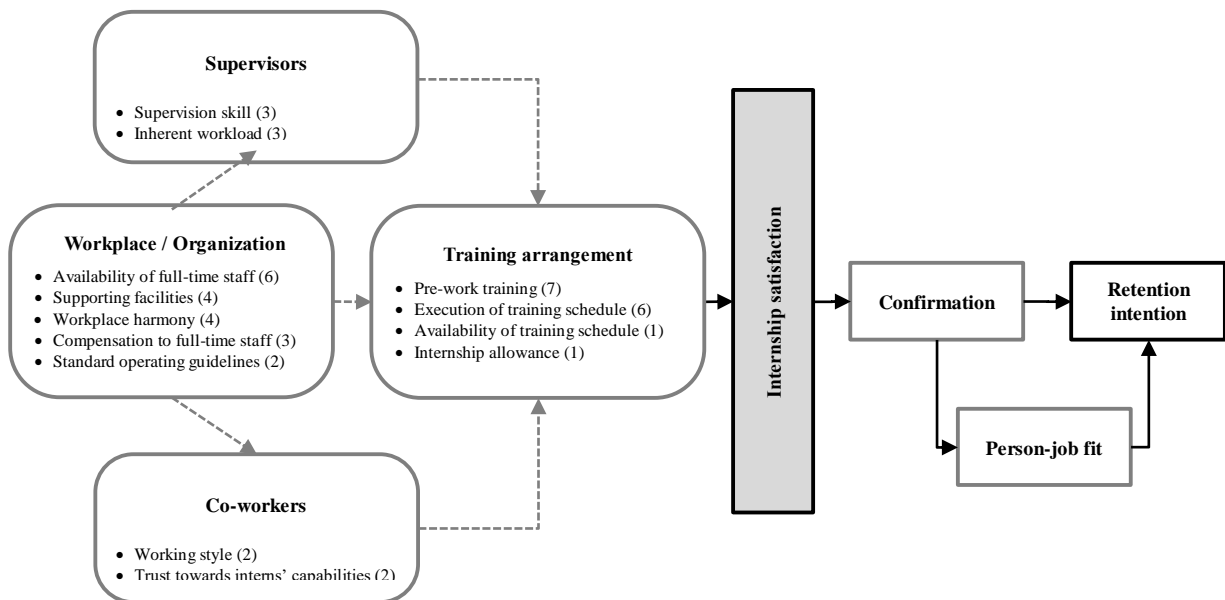
Note. Numbers shown in the parentheses refer to the number of mentioning given by interviewees.

4. Conclusions

Employee turnover has long been a huge challenge to the hospitality and tourism operators. This challenge is becoming fiercer to operators who manage the businesses in Asia, because the rapid growth of tourism industry has resulted into an increasing demand in competent talents (King & Tang, 2020). To equip students studying in Asian institutions with appropriate skillset prior to their graduation as well as to retain talented students to rejoin the industry upon the completion of their studies, both school administrators and industry practitioners must collaborate closely to develop and hence fully implement high quality internship programs for the future pillars (Wan, Wong, & Kong, 2014).

Being one of the few studies which specifically focuses on the matter of *"how various antecedents interactively affect Asian students' internship satisfaction"* and *"how the attainment of internship satisfaction subsequently affects Asian students' post-graduation behavior"*, the findings of this research study are expected to benefit both industry practitioners and academic researchers. Regarding the practical contributions of this study, the current study provides industry practitioners and particularly training managers with a comprehensive framework for evaluating and optimizing the internship program offered to existing or prospective interns. Wan et al. (2014) stressed that the design and implementation of effective internships is a key determinant to the long-term career commitment and engagement of students. If operators would like competent interns or candidates to rejoin their companies after completing their studies, operators should not solely focus on the specifics of training arrangement. Instead, they should notice about other associated aspects such as the provision of supporting facilities, the provision of supervision training to supervisors, the assurance of enough full-time staff and others.

Regarding the contribution of this study to knowledge and theory, since limited studies attempted to examine the topic from the Asian students' viewpoints, this study does redress the knowledge gap among the existing literature. Alike the results presented in Tse (2010), the current study shows that various dimensions of antecedents (e.g., *workplace*, *supervisors*, *co-workers*) would jointly affect Asian students' internship satisfaction. Moreover, the current findings exhibit that those identified antecedents do not affect students' internship satisfaction in an additive fashion. Instead, in line with the assertion given by Doty et al.'s (1993) configuration theory, the identified antecedents jointly and interactively determine the outcomes of interest. Despite the inclusion of a small size of samples in this study, the findings of this study do complement prior literature on this topic through providing a new angle to revisit a frequently researched topic.

But still, future researchers are recommended to verify the model proposed in this study (i.e., Figure 1) through replicating this study in another setting or utilizing the quantitative approach (e.g., survey plus structural model testing). To readers from the academic realm, they are advised to generalize the results with caution because most participating interviewees are from Hong Kong. The opinions shared by the interviewees might not reflect those shared by students from other Asian countries.

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