

# The effects of personality traits and attitudes on student uptake in hospitality employment

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## Abstract

A good understanding of why students either abandon or desire hospitality jobs is critical. The present study investigates the effects of personality traits and attitudinal factors on hospitality employment aspirations in a sample of 483 post-internship undergraduate hospitality seniors in Taiwan. The results show that the personality trait of extroversion is a significant predictor of students' attitudes towards and aspirations regarding hospitality jobs. Industry-person congruency is a key attitudinal factor mediating the effect of extroversion on hospitality employment aspirations. Several implications for both hospitality educators and practitioners are also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

A challenge currently facing Taiwan is the development of human capital, especially for the rapidly growing hospitality and tourism industry (Taiwan's Tourism Bureau, 2006). It has been noted that undergraduate hospitality and tourism programs in Taiwan have grown dramatically since the year 2000 (Teng, 2006). Between 2002 and 2005, the number of undergraduate hospitality, tourism and leisure programs increased by 72%, with the number of programs rising from 64 to 110 during the past three years (Department of Statistics, 2006). This phenomenon indicates that the number of students enrolling in hospitality and tourism programs is increasing rapidly. However, according to the National Graduates Survey conducted in 2003, the employment rates of undergraduate hospitality students who entered the hospitality workforce within one year after graduation was only 39% in Taiwan. In contrast with other programs such as those in education, natural science and business, the number of hospitality graduates who chose

jobs in the same field was rather small (Taiwan Higher Education Statistics, 2005). So far, there has been relatively little research on the emerging problem of why so many graduates abandon a career in the hospitality industry and why some still harbor aspirations in that sector.

As the author searches for an empirical explanation, the low employment rates of hospitality graduates in the hospitality sector may be attributed to their negative attitudes and experiences within the hospitality industry. Indeed, research regarding students' attitudes to careers in hospitality and tourism has been well discussed. For example, previous studies have shown that overall hospitality students display negative attitudes toward entering the hospitality industry, particularly with regard to job characteristics and working conditions (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000). Many studies also indicate that hospitality students feel disappointed with the real work experiences that they obtain through internships so that they develop unfavorable attitudes towards hospitality jobs, which may negatively influence the students' intentions to seek employment (Waryszak, 1999; Jenkins, 2001). Since attitudes are important for explaining and predicting behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), learning students'

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attitudes can help predict their hospitality employment aspirations.

For both hospitality educators and practitioners, a good understanding of what types of students desire hospitality jobs becomes critical. Research on job or career aspirations has traditionally focused on specific variables regarding employment situations, such as salary, job tenure, and perceived organizational success (e.g., Boudreau et al., 2001). Nevertheless, more enduring individual characteristics, particularly personality, may affect a student's intentions with regard to seeking employment (Berings et al., 2004). The last decade of personality research has suggested that the five-factor model of personality or the "Big Five" (e.g., Goldberg, 1990) is a valid way of describing many salient aspects of an individual's personality. The dimensions that make up the Big Five are extroversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae and Costa, 1987). Evidence from an analytic review (Tokar et al., 1998) shows that neuroticism is identified as a strong negative predictor, but that extroversion and conscientiousness demonstrate significant positive predictions regarding vocational choice-related behavior such as interest, aspirations, values, and decision making. It can be assumed that hospitality students who exhibit specific intentions of working in the hospitality industry should possess certain types of personality.

Prior studies have mainly discussed the effects of either personality traits or attitudes on the individual's career choice behavior. There have been limited investigations into linking personality traits and attitudes, together with their influence on the individual's career selection. Ross (1992) and Silva (2006) suggest that specific personality variables appear to develop much more positive/negative attitudes toward hospitality jobs or careers. Answering the questions would extend our knowledge of the links. Based on that, the present study attempts to further the existing research in that the Big Five personality traits constitute the predictor influencing hospitality students' attitudes, which will eventually affect their hospitality employment intentions. That is, the attitudes may serve as mediators of the Big Five's effect on employment aspirations. Accordingly, the aims of this study are to investigate the effects of the Big Five and the attitudinal factors on hospitality employment aspirations, in order to examine whether attitudinal factors will mediate the Big Five's effect on employment aspirations, and to provide insights into the impact of personality traits and attitudes with regard to employment intentions on the hospitality sector.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Students' attitudes and employment aspirations regarding the hospitality sector

Previous research has shown that hospitality students' attitudes towards hospitality jobs are quite controversial.

Some studies have argued for the existence of positive attitudes among secondary or high school students towards employment or careers in the tourism industry (Ross, 1992, 1994). However, many more studies have noted that hospitality graduates hold unfavorable attitudes toward working and making their careers in that industry. For example, Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) find evidence of the results of unfavorable evaluations towards different dimensions of working in the tourism industry. They have suggested that finding out hospitality students' perceptions and attitudes towards hospitality jobs may help predict the likelihood of students seeking employment in the same industry after graduation. Another study shows that the percentage of people who were likely to work in the hospitality industry was reduced by half over the 1978–1992 period. The percentage of people who considered the hospitality industry attractive decreased from 43% to 29% over that period (Getz, 1994). Most hospitality graduates have been found to believe that a number of extrinsic factors, such as poor working conditions, high pressure, long working hours, and a lack of motivation, training programs, and development opportunities, may contribute to poor employment aspirations, high turnover rates, and the wastage of educational investment (e.g., Kang and Gould, 2002; Jenkins, 2001). This should be a cause for concern since attitudes are considered to be effective predictors of behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Essentially, negative attitudes toward hospitality jobs are expected to decrease the students' desire to seek hospitality employment.

Previous studies have found that hospitality students are much less committed to the hospitality industry when they have more experience within the profession (Purcell and Quinn, 1996; Getz, 1994). The research shows that internship experience negatively affects the hospitality students' attitudes toward the industry and their intentions in terms of getting hospitality jobs (Waryszak, 1999). Zhang and Wu (2004) also identify that most students of vocational hospitality and tourism colleges in China know very little about hotels and tourism before entering colleges and many of them experience a "reality shock" when they find out more about hospitality and tourism operations. Similarly, Jenkins (2001) has noted that undergraduate hospitality students' perceptions of the industry deteriorate as their degree course progresses. While many studies have focused on the impact of internship/work experience on students' attitudes toward hospitality employment intentions, the present study seeks to find out another personal characteristic (i.e., personality traits) to further our knowledge on this important issue. As mentioned earlier, personality variables appear to form certain attitudes toward working in the hospitality industry (Ross, 1992). Hence, the next section will explain what the Big Five personality traits are and how they influence individual's attitudes toward choosing specific jobs or careers.

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