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## Driving forces in the decision to enroll in hospitality and tourism graduate program

Heesup Han <sup>a,1</sup>, Haejin Yoon <sup>b,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> College of Hospitality and Tourism Management Sejong University 98 Gunja-Dong, Gwanjin-Gu, Seoul 143-747, South Korea<sup>b</sup> Department of International Tourism, College of Business Administration Dong-A University, Bumin-dong 2-ga, Seo-gu, Busan 602-760, South Korea

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### ABSTRACT

In the present study, we examined variables relating to undergraduate students' decision-making regarding applying to a hospitality and tourism management graduate school by broadening and deepening the theory of goal-directed behavior. A survey was conducted at five major universities in South Korea. A structural equation modeling was used for hypotheses testing. Findings from the structural model indicated that our theoretical framework had superior predictive power to the original goal-directed behavior model; and our model satisfactorily captured total variance in intention. Our results provide a sufficient understanding of undergraduate students' decision-making process when selecting the same institution for graduate study.

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## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions and graduate colleges in universities continue to face increasingly competitive circumstances around the world (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Crosling & Heagney, 2009). Universities and graduate colleges that have a Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) graduate school also are facing an increasingly challenging and competitive environment (Lee, Yuan, Hwang, & Kim, 2012). Not surprisingly, university administrators and graduate coordinators in these institutions are actively seeking ways and developing strategies to ensure their competitive advantages (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Lee, Yuan, et al., 2012; Thomas, 2011). Under such circumstances, increasing total student enrollments in graduate school through the development and implementation of effective recruitment and/or retention strategies is becoming more and more important. Such activities are directly associated with a university's survival and success in the higher education market and regarded as effective ways to ensure sustainable advantages (e.g., solid and predictable financial base/benefit that maintains program and university activities) (Gleiman & Mokhtarian, 2013; Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen et al., 2001; Lee, Yuan et al., 2012; Thomas, 2011). Accordingly, "growing" the graduate student population, which is increasingly important to marketplace success, is one of the major goals of higher education institutions (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Gleiman & Mokhtarian, 2013; Lee, Yuan et al., 2012).

Researchers agree that an individual's decision-making process is very intricate, generally involving a volitional/non-volitional process, motivation procedure, and affective process (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Carrus, Passafaro, & Bonnes,

\* Corresponding author. Fax: +82 51 201 4335.

E-mail addresses: [heesup.han@gmail.com](mailto:heesup.han@gmail.com) (H. Han), [hjyoon@dau.ac.kr](mailto:hjyoon@dau.ac.kr) (H. Yoon).<sup>1</sup> Fax: 82 2 3408 4314.

2008; Lee, Song et al., 2012; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001, 2004; Song, Lee, Kang, & Boo, 2012). An investigation of underlying factors actively driving an individual's intentions would provide significant insights into his/her decision formation for a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Han & Kim, 2010; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). In higher education, a comprehension of undergraduate students' decision-making regarding graduate study is one necessary element in establishing efficient marketing and retention strategies. Nevertheless, little is known about the role of volitional, non-volitional, affective, and motivational procedures in college students' decision formation for graduate study. In addition, there is a general consensus that college students make cognitive, affective, and goal assessments when building college-selection/enrollment intention (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Thomas, 2011). Yet, these assessment processes has rarely been simultaneously integrated into a specific decision-making framework in education. Given this, we employed the Model of Goal-directed Behavior (MGB). The MGB framework generally comprises such important processes; and thus it can more sufficiently explicate college students' decision-making about entering graduate school than other theories. Compared to such socio-psychological theories as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) or Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) that simply considers volitional and non-volitional dimensions, the MGB allows more accurate prediction of individuals' decision/behavior because of the explanatory role of affective and motivational factors (Han, Kim, & Hyun, 2014; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2004).

Previous studies have shown that quality, reputation, and satisfaction are important concepts in higher education (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Thomas, 2011). It is generally agreed that higher levels of education/program quality, student satisfaction with program/school, and program/school reputation lead to higher levels of return intention, positive word-of-mouth, and student loyalty (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; DeBourgh, 2003; Elliot & Healy, 2001; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Thomas, 2011). A conceptual framework involving quality, reputation, or satisfaction has been regarded as an essential theoretical method of accounting for the apparent comprehension of student behavior in a higher education context. Nevertheless, little research has been undertaken on how these variables affect undergraduate students' decision-making process when selecting a graduate program at the same university. In addition, no research has incorporated such decisive variables into the MGB to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of students' intention to engage in graduate study.

Accordingly, our main objective was to investigate the formation of HTM undergraduate students' intention to enter an HTM graduate school at the same university. A comprehensive model (extended MGB) involving established constructs of the original MGB as well as variables important in explaining university students' decision/behavior (quality, satisfaction, and reputation) was developed and tested. In particular, this study sought to identify key elements affecting undergraduate students' intention to engage in HTM graduate study, incorporate the dissected factors into the original MGB to improve the theory's sufficiency and accuracy, identify the relative importance of study variables in decision formation, and assess mediating roles of desire, attitude, and satisfaction within the proposed theoretical framework in a higher education context.

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. Competitive HTM education market in South Korea

Since the hospitality and tourism industry is regarded as one of the most promising industries of the 21st century and one of the most valuable industries for globalization, hospitality and tourism education for both undergraduate and graduate students is offered at many institutions around the world (Kwong & Law, 2008; Lee, Cha, & Kim, 2004). Further, increasing numbers of students are seeking to pursue their degree in HTM graduate schools (Madanoglu & Martin, 2003). Particularly in South Korea, HTM graduate programs have greatly benefited from this growth and environment (e.g., financial advantage, enhanced enrollments, increased entrance competition ratio, improved university reputation, quality graduate students, better industry connection resulted from the enlarged enrollments of senior-level hospitality practitioners) for the last two decades. Thus, many institutions have established HTM graduate programs. However, in recent years, enrollments in graduate schools in South Korea have been quickly decreasing. The supply of HTM graduate programs appears to already be exceeding the demand for graduate studies. This phenomenon is mainly due to the rapid increase in the number of HTM graduate schools and decrease in the number of university students. According to the Ministry of Education in Korea and recent reports, the significant decrease in the school-age population means there will be no difference between numbers of applicants and university places in 2018; approximately 200,000 university places will be empty in 2030 (a 45% decrease in applicants compared to 2012); and roughly 50% of higher education institutions in Korea will close by 2023 (Han, 2013; Kim, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2013). Under such circumstances, at present, HTM graduate schools in South Korean universities are facing an enrollment crisis, and competition among the programs is becoming severe. Active marketing to recruit international students to U.S. HTM graduate programs and school administrators' efforts to minimize deterring factors and maximize facilitating factors for study abroad (Madanoglu & Martin, 2003) have worsened the competitive situation in the Korean HTM education market. Therefore, increasing the numbers of students in HTM graduate programs by establishing effective recruiting and retention strategies is becoming a fundamental goal for its survival in the challenging educational environment of South Korea.

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