ABSTRACT

There is currently a worldwide increase in the demand for more highly educated workers. This trend is more apparent in the marketing sector. Many companies and employers tend to only hire job applicants and graduates with a master's degree for their marketing jobs. The present study reports the attitude and intention of marketing students to pursue a master's degree. A total of 148 marketing students participated in the study, and it was found that marketing students had a positive attitude and intention to pursue a master's degree. In the present study, it was found that part-time marketing students had a more positive attitude as compared with the full-time marketing students. Also, attitude, family, and friends were found to be the main determinants of marketing students' intention. The study therefore suggests some measures to encourage students to pursue master's degrees and thereby meet the employers' needs, and concludes with some suggestions for future research.

Key words: Marketing students, master's degree, attitude, intention.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the activities of developing the knowledge, values and skills of human beings and helping them to understand the different aspects of their life (Liddy, 2004). It is the process that aims at physiological, psychological, moral and social development of human beings. Education begins at birth and continues throughout the rest of one's life. At present, with the increase in competition in life and work, people are aspiring to receive a higher and better education. Companies and employers, at the same time, are looking for more highly-educated employees to help them to deal with the increasing challenging market environment. Governments are also investing more in education in order to increase the stock and quality of national human capital. The importance of education has been increasingly recognized worldwide.

Annually, universities and higher education institutions worldwide produce approximately 22 million graduates (National Science Board, 2008). However, only few of the graduates will proceed to a master's degree. In Hong Kong for example, less than 10% of the local students pursue a master's degree immediately or shortly after graduation from their undergraduate degree. Nevertheless, the increasing dynamic and complex business environment has forced many local and overseas firms to seek for more talented human resources to work for them. An increasing number of companies prefer to hire graduates with master’s degrees (Allison, 2018). Jobs that require master’s degrees are on the rise and are expected to grow by 13.7% in the next decade (Purdue University Global, 2018). This trend in particular is growing in the marketing sector. Today, many employers hire only those job applicants with a master’s degree for their marketing jobs (McKay, 2019).

Given the increasing demand and emphasis on marketers with a master’s degree, the objective of this study is to examine the attitude and intention of marketing students toward pursuing a master’s degree and explore the underlying factors. The study intends to provide recommendations for universities to encourage more marketing students to pursue master’s degrees and meet the employer’s needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Master’s degrees

A master’s degree refers to “a degree awarded for
successful completion of a program generally requiring 1 or 2 years of full-time college-level study beyond the bachelor’s degree” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In general, there are three types of master’s degrees. The first types of master’s degrees are awarded in the liberal arts and sciences for advanced scholarship in a specific discipline or subject area. For example, the Master of Arts (MA) degrees and the Master of Science (MSc) degrees. The second type of master’s degrees are those degrees awarded for completing a professionally oriented program, such as the Master in Accountancy, the Master in Business Administration, the Master in Finance, the Master in Marketing and the Master in Music. The third types of master’s degrees are research degrees awarded for completion of a program of research and submission of a thesis. For example, the Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degrees. As compared with Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), MPhil is shorter in program duration and requires the completion of a smaller thesis (Bourner et al., 1999).

The history of master's degrees can be traced back to the 12th century when the title of 'Master' was used to represent people holding a license to teach (Keen, 2016). In the next several centuries, the 'Master' title was developed from an honorary title to a technical title, which required the payment of fee and completion of seven years of study (Harriman, 1938). Many universities in the US and Europe continued the conferment of Master title to indicate sustained scholarly activity into the 20th century. At present, master’s degrees are both earned degrees and honorary degrees that are awarded by higher institutions and universities.

Few scholars have attempted to understand the factors influencing people’s demand for postgraduate study (including master’s degrees). In a study of UK and US students’ choice of postgraduate study, Hesketh and Knight (1999) found that the cost of postgraduate study, study mode, financial matters and career opportunities are significant factors on the student choices. Previous studies also showed that factors, such as interest, the development of own capacities and personal satisfactions, could affect the decision of students when pursuing postgraduate study (Baguley et al., 2015). To the authors’ knowledge, no study has been conducted to evaluate the two proximal determinants of human behaviour, namely attitude and intention, when examining students’ decision to pursue a master’s degree or postgraduate study. Attitude and intention are the major influences on human behaviour (Blackwell et al., 2006). According to Ajzen (1991), attitude and intention are the main predictors of the behaviour of an individual.

Attitude and intention

The concept of attitude has long been studied by social psychologists. Attitude refers to the readiness for action or attention of a specific sort (Baldwin, 1901). It is the mental process of individuals that determines the actual and potential actions (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918). Attitude is the predisposition to respond to an object in a favourable or unfavourable manner (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Ajzen (1991) claims that attitude is the extent to which a person has positive or negative evaluation of a given behaviour. Social actions of human beings, ranging from purchase behaviour and earning a living to religious behaviour and political actions, are all determined by their attitudes (Krech et al., 1962). Previous studies have found a strong relationship between attitude and a person’s behaviour (Ashton and Warr, 1976; Werner, 1977). Attitude affects what a person will think, do, hear and see and how he will react to people, situations and events (Cassel and Vincent, 2011).

Intention (or behavioural intention) refers to the likelihood that a behavioural alternative will be selected (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). It is a person’s motivation regarding the performance of a specific behaviour (Gagnon et al., 2003). Intention indicates how hard a person is willing to try and how much effort he is willing to put in order to perform the behaviour. Past researches have shown that intention determines the actual behaviour of individuals (Komatsu et al., 2013; Venkatesh et al., 2003).

According to the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), a person’s attitude toward a behaviour and his subjective norm affect his behavioural intention which subsequently determines his actual behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Subjective norm refers to the person’s perception of all the social pressures put on him to carry out the behaviour or not. As Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) claim, people will intend to perform an act if they believe that other people (that is, their referent groups) think that they should do so. From both theoretical and empirical perspectives, subjective norm is believed to be determined by different social and personal normative beliefs (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein, 1967; Schwartz and Tessler, 1972). Normative beliefs are the opinions of salient referents about if an individual should carry out certain behaviour or not (Zhang, 2007). Salient referents are the important people who can influence a person’s behaviour (Chang et al., 1996).

The TRA presents a clear and simple framework of the inter-relationship between attitude, subjective norm, behavioural intention and behaviour. Figure 1 shows the TRA in diagram form.

Many studies have used the TRA to examine students’ study choice decision (Agbola and Cheng, 2017; Kuechler et al., 2013). They have all proved that the TRA is robust and valid for understanding the decision-making process of students when selecting study programs. Moreover, due to the obvious and strong theoretical link between behavioural intention and actual behaviour, most previous TRA studies used and measured intention of individuals rather than actual behaviour (Bang et al., 2000; Cheng and
On the basis of the TRA model, in this study, it is proposed that marketing students’ attitude toward pursuing a master’s degree and subjective norm will determine their intention to pursue a master’s degree. Furthermore, according to the studies of Agbola and Cheng (2017) and Kumar and Kumar (2013) on students’ decision to pursue a study programme, it is proposed that marketing students’ subjective norm will include the opinions of five groups of salient referents namely family, friends, other students, advisors and teachers. Therefore, based on theory and previous findings, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Attitude towards pursuing a master’s degree will influence intention to pursue a master’s degree
H2: Family will influence intention to do a master’s degree
H3: Friends will influence intention to pursue a master’s degree
H4: Other students will influence intention to pursue a master’s degree
H5: Advisors will influence intention to pursuing a master’s degree
H6: Teachers will influence intention to pursue a master’s degree

The proposed conceptual framework of this study is shown in Figure 2.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A survey using self-administered questionnaires was used to collect data in this study. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A consisted of measurement items related to the research variables (intention, attitude and subjective norm). Section B consisted of questions gathering the respondents’ demographic information (gender, age, year of study, mode of study, academic performance, source of funding and further study plan). The measurement items in Section A were modified from Kumar and Kumar (2013) study. Intention was measured by two items that asked about the intention of and the likelihood of the respondents to pursue a master’s degree. Attitude was measured by two items that assessed the extent to which the respondents believe that pursuing a
master’s degree is a good idea and a wise decision. Subjective norm was measured by five statements that asked the respondents about the extent to which the five referent groups (family, friends, fellow students, advisors and teachers) recommend them to pursue a master’s degree. A 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) was used for all the measurement items.

The questionnaires were distributed in class to full-time and part-time students from a Bachelor’s programme in marketing at a university in Hong Kong. In total, 250 questionnaires were distributed. At the end of data collection, 154 questionnaires were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 61.6%. However, six of the questionnaires were found invalid leaving 148 valid questionnaires for the analysis (valid response rate = 59.2%). The data collected were analysed using the SPSS 25 statistical software. Descriptive statistics were computed. An independent-samples t-test and a multiple regression were also conducted to test for differences between student groups and examine the relationships between variables.

RESULTS

Respondents analysis

Among the 148 valid respondents, 50 (33.8%) were male marketing students and 98 (66.2%) were female marketing students. This result is in line with previous studies which showed that business degrees were pursued by more female students than male students (Lee et al., 2010). In terms of study mode, a majority of the marketing students were full-time students (70.3%, N = 104) while the others were part-time students (29.7%, N = 44). The higher number of full-time respondents than part-time respondents can be explained by the fact that the majority of students pursue their first degrees in full-time mode than in part-time mode. Table 1 shows the profile of the respondents.

Attitude and intention to pursue a master’s degree

Students’ attitude and intention to do a master’s degree were each measured by two items. The means and standard deviations of the composite scales of attitude and intention were computed (Table 2). In general, the marketing students had a positive attitude and intention to pursue a master’s degree. The means of the composite scale of attitude and intention were 4.48 and 4.15, respectively both were well above 3.50. By comparing the attitude and intention between full-time and part-time marketing students, it was found that the part-time marketing students had a more positive attitude and intention than the full-time marketing students. The means of the attitude and intention to pursue a master’s degree of part-time marketing students were 4.84 and 4.51, respectively while those of the full-time marketing students were 4.32 and 4.00, respectively.

Independent-samples t-test

To determine whether the differences seen in the attitude and intention between the full-time and part-time marketing students were statistically significant, an independent-samples t-test was used for comparison of the means. Table 3 shows the results of the independent-samples t-test. For attitude, the Levene’s test (p = 0.004) showed that variances between the two groups of students were statistically unequal. With equal variances not assumed, independent-sample t-test (p = 0.021) showed that the means of attitude toward pursuing a master’s
degree of the full-time and part-time marketing students were statistically unequal. The part-time marketing students (mean = 4.84) had a more positive attitude toward pursuing a master’s degree than the full-time marketing students (mean = 4.32). As regards intention, the Levene’s test (p = 0.055) showed that variances between the two groups of students were statistically equal. Given equal variances assumed, the results of independent samples t-test (p=0.061) showed no significant difference in the means of intention to pursue a master’s degree between the two groups of students. This suggests that the part-time and full-time marketing students did not differ in their intention to pursue a master’s degree.

### Multiple regression analysis

To examine whether marketing students’ attitude toward pursuing a master’s degree and subjective norm determine their intention to pursue a master’s degree, a multiple regression analysis was performed. The dependent variable was intention and the independent variables were attitude, family, friends, other students, advisors and teachers. The linear combination of the six independent variables was significantly related to the dependent variable (intention), R square = 0.737, adjusted R square = 0.726, F (6, 141) = 65.917, p = 0.000 (Table 4). An estimated 73.7% of variance of intention could be accounted for by the linear combination of predictors (attitude, family, friends, other students, advisors and teachers).

As shown in Table 5, three variables, namely attitude, family and friends were significant and related positively to intention. Therefore, H1, H2 and H3 were supported. Among the three factors, attitude (β = 0.814, p = 0.000) was the most powerful predictor of intention, followed by family (β = 0.253, p = 0.000) and friends (β = 0.201, p =0.030). Surprisingly, other students (β = 0.157, p =

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**Table 3: Independent-samples t-test for full-time and part-time marketing students.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Leven’s test for equality of variances</th>
<th>t-test for equality of means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>8.623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>2.352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>3.748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>2.070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 4: Multiple regression analysis: model summary.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of the estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.859a</td>
<td>0.737</td>
<td>0.726</td>
<td>0.80391</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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a. Dependent Variable: Intention.
b. Predictors: (Constant), teachers, attitude, family, other students, friends and advisors.
The results are analyzes the TRA to understand the decision-making process of marketing students in pursuing a master's degree. The findings are in line with those of Kuechler et al. (2009) and Zhang (2007), who found that attitude and subjective norm were keys to students' study choices. Among all social groups, only family and friends have impact on marketing students' intention, indicating that the marketing students tend to trust information and advice from family and friends when deciding to pursue a master's degree. This is in agreement with the findings of Ma et al. (2000) that parents exert significant influences on the behaviour of adolescents. Students rely heavily on their parents' advice in deciding their study choices. This is also in line with the findings of Johnston (2010) that family and friends were the most influential sources of information for students when considering their higher education.

Based on the above findings, there are two recommendations for universities to encourage more marketing students to pursue a master's degree. First, universities should put more effort into increasing and enhancing marketing students' attitude toward pursuing their master's degrees. For example, redesigning the program structure and curriculum of their master's degrees by incorporating more attractive subjects (such as big data and digital marketing strategy) and program features (such as flexible course offering and flexible exit points). Another method is to provide more student support services to marketing students pursuing their master's degrees, including more common services (such as medical services and housing services) and benefits (such as scholarships and subsidies). Second, universities should direct some of their promotional efforts for the master's degree programs to family members and friends of the marketing students. For example, sending direct mails or emails with program information to student parents and friends, advertising on parent and youth forums and organizing free information seminars for student parents and friends.

This study utilizes the TRA to understand the decision-making process of marketing students in pursuing a master's degree. It affirms that attitude and subjective norm can determine students' behavioural intention. The study contributes to the research on TRA by confirming that attitude and subjective norm are strong predictors of behaviour. It also contributes to the literature on consumer behaviour by offering useful information regarding the factors influencing students' decision to pursue a master's degree.

There are two limitations in the current study. First, the research framework is based on the TRA model which considers only the influences of attitude and subjective norm on intention. There may be other factors that can influence marketing students' intention to pursue a master's degree. Second, the sample for this study was marketing students from Hong Kong. This limits the generalizability of the study findings to marketing students in other countries.

Despite its limitations, this study provides good insights...
into the attitude and intention of marketing students to pursue a master’s degree and the influences of social groups (mainly parents and friends) on intention. Future research may wish to extend the analysis to examine students of other disciplines and examine other factors such as personality traits (Noel et al., 2003), perceived value (Agbola and Cheng, 2017), self-actualization (Lee et al., 2008) and individual goals (Kember et al., 2010) that are potentially likely to influence a student’s study choice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to the School of Professional Education and Executive Development and the College of Professional and Continuing Education, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University for their support.

FUNDING

This work was funded by the College of Professional and Continuing Education [project reference number SP-CB-2016-106(J)].

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