

# Why Students Not Choose a Hospitality and Tourism Program - A Case Study of U.S. Undergraduate Students



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## Abstract

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Going beyond the previous research about how to encourage more students to select hospitality and tourism (hereafter H&T) management as their major, rather than focusing on the factors motivating students to claim H&T management as their major, the present study aims to examine the constraints preventing students from becoming the H&T management majors. By employing a case study methodology, 14 switching-major students from a H&T management program at a public university in the north-east of United States were interviewed. The results indicate that the elements from students' personal side, their parents' side, and H&T management programs' side all play the significant impacts on inhibiting students to select H&T management as their major. The feasible solutions and strategies to overcome such identified constraints are recommended.

**Keywords:** *hospitality and tourism; major selection; constraints; undergraduate students; case study*

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## 1. Introduction

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As one of the biggest industries by employment in the United States, the hospitality and tourism industry has demonstrated the tremendous momentum in creating and offering job opportunities in the U.S. job market in the past ten years and will continue such striking trend in the next ten years according to the reports from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). As the H&T industry is generating a large number of job opportunities, it turns to be more critical for the educational institutions to meet such growing demand by supplying enough qualified graduates. In particular, as the large national and multi-national corporations have increasingly dominated ownership of H&T business, the need for managers with a formal education in H&T management is also rapidly growing. To respond such huge crave for the competent job candidates, the number of postsecondary institutions offering H&T programs has more than quadrupled between 1970s and 2000s (Riegel & Dallas, 2004).

Nevertheless, H&T is not a popular major in the U.S. and most of freshmen did not select H&T as their intended major when they started their postsecondary programs. According to the data revealed in the report, *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016* (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Aragon, Sayson, & Rios-Aguilar, 2017), which was based on the survey among 137,456 first-time, full-time students who entered 184 U.S. colleges and universities of varying type in the fall of 2016, only 0.3% of freshmen selected H&T as their intended major

among the 90 different majors. Therefore, the fast growth of H&T management programs has not relieved the growing pressure from the H&T business for increasing the supply of well-trained graduates, but has inevitably generated intense competition among H&T management programs for both better quality and increased quantity of students. As a result, a number of studies have been conducted to understand how to encourage more students to select H&T as their major by identifying the key factors motivating students to major in H&T management (Bushell, Prosser, Faulkner, & Jafari, 2001; Huyton, 1997; Kim, Guo, Wang & Agrusa, 2007; Lee, Olds, & Lee, 2010; O'Mahony, McWilliams, & Whitelaw, 2001; Purcell & Quinn, 1996; Zhao, 1991).

However, those previous studies treated the study subjects, the students studying in the H&T management programs, as a holistic cohort and did not consider the nature that most of freshmen did not select H&T management as their intended major as shown in the survey report (i.e. Eagan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Aragon, Sayson, & Rios-Aguilar, 2017). In other words, most of the current students with the major of H&T management did not originally select H&T management as their major when they started their college programs. Therefore, a critical question is coming into being. The question is why most of the current H&T management program students did not originally select H&T management as their major. By answering this question, it would help students save their time of degree completing, and, ultimately, the cost of college; it would also help H&T management department locate more excellent major students directly and make those

students' college experiences more successful by engaging with them as early as possible.

## **2.Literature Review**

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The selection of a college major is a vital decision that all college students must make and has a huge impact on shaping their future career path. Such decision does not only affect students' personal life, but directly determine the viability of postsecondary programs and the development of industries which heavily depend on the supply of qualified graduates. To understand how students select their majors, the previous studies have primarily focused on identifying the key influential factors affecting the selection of majors by students from the different disciplines in various countries. For example, Aldosary and Assaf (1996) studied the new orientation students, who selected a major in the College of Environmental Design from a university in Saudi Arabia, to reveal the most important factors influencing the major selection. Beffy, Fougere and Maurel (2012) analyzed survey data collected from university graduates in the fields of sciences, humanities and social sciences, and law, economics and management to find out the determinants of postsecondary major choices in France. More research with the similar study purpose has been conducted in the United States among the different types of universities and by the different approaches (Crampton, Walstrom, & Schambach, 2006; Keck, 2016; Keshishian, Brocavich, Boone, & Pal, 2010; Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005; Wiswall & Zafar, 2013).

Following such study trends, many research-

ers have also examined the factors motivating students to select H&T management as their major. Table 1 provides a glimpse of those major research. As shown in Table 1, based on their research on high school students in Australia, O'Mahony, McWilliams, and Whitelaw (2001) discovered the reasons why high school students chose to enroll in a hospitality-degree course at Victoria University in Melbourne of Australia. Kim, Guo, Wang, and Agrusa (2007) studied the students in China, Taiwan, and Korea at both undergraduate and master's level to find out the reasons why those students want to major in H&T management. Focusing on the same region, Lee, Kim, and Lo (2008) studied college students in Hong Kong to identify why they wanted to study H&T management and why they wanted to pursue H&T management degrees abroad. Meanwhile, by examining a specific urban university in Toronto of Canada, Dodds and Muchnick (2008) revealed the expectations of students for choosing the H&T program. Different from previous research, Lee, Olds, and Lee (2010) focused on the United States by investigating the U.S. students to understand what motivated them to major in H&T management. Furthermore, Mohammad and Alsaleh (2013) conducted the similar study by examining the undergraduate students in the Jordan Applied University College of Hospitality and Tourism. More recently, Jamnia and Pan (2017) and Shyju and Tanwar (2020) explored the same research question by studying the undergraduate students pursuing on H&T in a private university of Taiwan and the H&T students at the postgraduate level in India respectively. All those studies

identified a variety of factors motivating students to select H&T management as their major.

**Table 1** *Research on Identifying the Factors Motivating Students to Select Hospitality and Tourism Management as Their Major*

Publishing Year	Authors	Study Subjects	Study Purposes
2001	O'Mahony, McWilliams, & Whitelaw	Australian high school students	The reasons why high school students chose to enroll in a hospitality-degree course at Victoria University in Melbourne of Australia
2007	Kim, Guo, Wang, & Agrusa	The students in China, Taiwan, and Korea at both undergraduate and master's level	The reasons why those students want to major in hospitality and tourism management
2008	Lee, Kim, & Lo	College students in Hong Kong	The major reasons why college students wanted to pursue hospitality and tourism management degrees abroad
2008	Dodds & Muchnick	Students in an urban university in Toronto of Canada	The expectations of students for choosing a hospitality and tourism program
2010	Lee, Olds, & Lee	The U.S. students in the Western, Midwestern, and Southern HTM institutions	The reasons why college students in the U.S. want to study hospitality and tourism management and the major subject areas within hospitality and tourism management in which U.S. students want to specialize
2013	Mohammad & Alsaleh	Undergraduate students in the Jordan Applied University College of Hospitality and Tourism in Jordan	The reasons why students want to major in tourism

2017	Jamnia & Pan	Undergraduate students to seek studies in tourism and hospitality in a Taiwanese private university	The motivations for seeking studies in tourism and hospitality
2020	S h y j u & Tanwar	Students pursuing the hospitality and tourism management at the postgraduate level in India.	The key factors explaining students' motivations to study a hospitality and tourism management program.

Nevertheless, such research has only focused on one side of story about the students' major selection process and treated the study subjects, H&T management major students, as a simple monolithic group of people. In fact, the students' major selection process is a negotiation process between motivators and constraints. Besides the factors motivating students to select their majors, there are also some constraints which prevent students from becoming the majors. The previous research has primarily focused on identifying the motivators, there is a lack of study about the constraints. In addition, the previous research did not consider the fact that not all the current H&T management major students originally claimed H&T management as their major, but there are a number of students switching to H&T management from other majors. And, it is not known what prevents those students from selecting H&T management as their major originally.

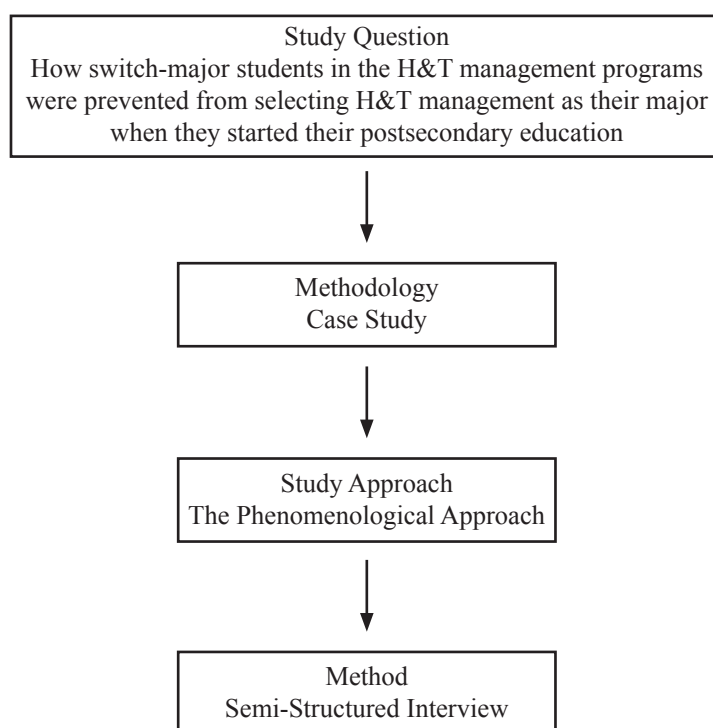
Furthermore, as revealed in the previous studies about the different major selection regimes in the world, the United States is well-known for very flexible major selection policies and the ability to change majors with few restrictions (Bordon & Fu, 2015; Hastings, Neilson, & Zimmerman, 2013). As a result, based on the data reported by the U.S. Department of Education about the extent to which first-time associate's and bachelor's degree students changed their majors within 3 years of enrollment, about 30 percent of undergraduates who had declared a major had changed their major at least once (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These data indicate that switching major is very prevalent in the U.S. undergraduate programs. In particular, not many U.S. freshmen originally claimed themselves as H&T management majors when they start their postsecondary programs. According to the data revealed in the report, *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016* (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Aragon, Sayson, & Rios-Aguilar, 2017), which was based on the survey among 137,456 first-time, full-time students who entered 184 U.S. college and universities of varying type in the fall of 2016, only 0.3% of freshmen selected H&T management as their intended major among the 90 different majors.

Therefore, going beyond the previous research, the present study is trying to answer the question, why those switching-major students did not originally claim H&T management as their major. Through answering this question, the major constraints, which prevent those students from selecting H&T management as their major originally, can be identified. Then, possible solutions and strategies could be recommended to encourage more potential students to join in the H&T management programs as early as possible by helping them overcome those constraints. In particular, by taking the effective measures to remove those influential constraints, H&T management programs could make themselves more appealing to qualified degree seeking candidates, and eventually, providing more competent graduates to the job market in H&T industry.

### 3. Methodology

The present study seeks to understand how switch-major students in the H&T management programs were prevented from selecting H&T management as their major when they started their postsecondary education. To accomplish the study objective, a case study methodology has been utilized. According to Yin (2009), case studies are optimal when seeking to answer the questions of why and how certain decisions are taken. Such methodology provides a deeper-level understanding of the social processes in a place or places by interviewing informants and conducting participant observation (Denzin, 1989). Figure 1 provides a visualized framework to demonstrate how the present research has been designed.

**Figure 1.** *The Framework of Research Design*



A phenomenological approach based on in-depth interviews was employed in the present study. Phenomenological studies examine the meaning of human experiences through the detailed descriptions provided by the people being studied (Creswell, 1994; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Sensitizing concepts were used in order to provide a general sense of reference, or direction for the analysis of the data (Patton, 1990) including the concepts of constraints. The interviews followed a semi-structured format in which the main topics covered remained the same, but the order of questions varied between the interviews. Each question was followed by a series of probes designed to obtain a fuller description of experiences and more detailed responses.

The process of data analysis began as soon as the initial interviews were completed, and it lasted throughout the duration of the study. The data were analyzed using constant comparison technique (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). First, the author read interview transcripts to develop a broader understanding of the topic. Emergent major themes were color coded to aid in the identification and consolidation of findings. Subsequently, each transcript was re-read several times by the author in order to identify sub-themes and to ascertain that they truly represented the information gathered during the course of the interviews. New observations, emerging themes and issues that surfaced during the interviews were followed up in subsequent conversations, which facilitate verification of external consistency of the previously obtained material. After the completion of all interviews, the transcripts were re-read once again and relevant information that confirmed as well as

contradicted emerging themes were identified.

Trustworthiness, credibility and confirmability of data analysis were achieved through reflexivity and triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). By contrasting identified themes from the interview data with study subjects' academic records, reflexivity was reached. The author located consistency among the themes discovered in both types of data sources. Triangulation was accomplished by sharing and discussing findings with academic colleagues and research assistants when interview data were analyzed and interpreted (Flick, 2005; Wolcott, 1994).

In order to improve the validity of the study, particularly to enhance the accuracy and credibility of interview content and its interpretation, the author double checked the study subjects' views. Interview transcripts were sent to the interviewees for verification and feedback. While study subjects' verification is a standard practice used to increase the internal validity of the data, because interviewees can read the transcripts and assure themselves that the sensitive information that they provide is not altered in any way. Furthermore, in order to test for the internal validity of the data, themes that emerged from the study were presented to selected interviewees and their comments and suggestions were followed in the data analysis stage. Finally, external consultants who did not have connection with this study were also invited to examine whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions were supported by the data in order to help in assessing reliability of the qualitative data.

To understand why students did not claim H&T management as their major when they originally

started their undergraduate programs, 51 students who switched into H&T management department from other majors at a public university in the northeast part of United States were invited to participate in the study, and 14 of them accepted the invitation for an invitation acceptance rate of 27.5%. In addition, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), in their research about how many interviews researchers needed for a qualitative interview study, has identified that it requires at least 12 interviews to discern themes concerning common views and experiences among study subjects. In other words, the present study's sample size is big enough to provide sufficient data needed to identify all the themes and reach the data saturation stage which refers to the point at which "fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113).

A particular point of significance for the selected study site is that 39% of the department's current students in 2019-2020 academic year were the switching-major students. In other words, a number of students at the selected study site did not claim H&T management as their major when they originally started their undergraduate programs. The interviews were conducted by using open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences of selecting their major when they were originally enrolled in the current university. To ensure the adequate evidence for each theme was obtained to reach conclusions (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs, & Jinks, 2018), data collection came to an end when no new information, fact or idea was

obtained from the data (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Each interview lasted about 15 – 20 minutes.

#### **4. Findings and Discussions**

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After data were collected, the data analysis process started. First, the social-demographic characteristics of study subjects were identified. Among the 14 interviewed students, 9 of them were female students (64%) and the rest 5 students were males (36%). Most of them were seniors which include 8 students (57%), while 4 students (29%) were in their junior year and 2 students (14%) claimed themselves as sophomores. Except for 2 out-of-state students (14%), the rest 12 were in-state students (86%). 12 students (86%) were Caucasians and 2 African-American students (14%). 3 students (21%) was the transfer student from the local community colleges, the rest 11 students (79%) started their freshman year directly at the university where the present study was conducted.

After the major socio-demographic features of study subjects were uncovered, the interview transcripts were analyzed to identify the primary constraints preventing study subjects from selecting H&T management as their major originally. To locate the influential constraints, the study subjects were asked to share their major-selection experiences since they started their postsecondary education. During the interviews, each of the study subjects shared the information about how they selected their first major, why they quitted their previous major(s) and became the H&T management majors, and why they did not select H&T management as their major originally. By taking the phenomenological approach, which fo-



cuses on examining the meaning of human experiences through the detailed descriptions provided by the people being studied (Creswell, 1994; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the present study is trying to provide a full picture about how the constraints may affect students' major-selection process.

Through interviewing the study subjects, the whole stories of their major-selection experiences were learned and the fundamental constraints affecting their major-selection decision were identified. First, the interviews revealed that most study subjects did not know H&T management very well. For example, when one of study subjects was asked why she did not selected H&T management as her major originally, she replied:

*"I think because I didn't have any experiences in it. I wasn't, at that time, I wasn't working at a job in hospitality. So, I didn't know too much about it, I wasn't surrounded by it. So, I didn't really know anything about it. And, that's why I did not select hospitality."* (R2)

In addition, when another study subject responded to the same question, she shared:

*"I honestly didn't know hospitality management as major. I didn't know anything about it. When I first thought, I thought it's related to hospital like a lot people probably think it."* (R8)

Although the both study subjects attributed the root causes of not selecting H&T management as their major to their lack of knowledge about such major, their responses unveiled two totally different constraints preventing them from selecting H&T management as their major. The first con-

straint is the absence of information about the career opportunities offered by H&T management field. The second detected constraint is the misinterpretation of profession caused by the name of major. Such findings indicate that it is critical for H&T management programs to provide adequate profession guidance to the potential major students and name their programs in a more perceptible way. In particular, since H&T management is a career-oriented major, it appears important to form a clearer picture about the career paths available for the potential major students to pursue on when introducing the programs to them and create a direct and close link between the name of program and the profession it represents.

The second finding from the interviews about the reason for not selecting H&T management as the major is the influence from students' parents. Such influential effect from students' parents can be detected from the following study subjects' responses about why they were not willing to select H&T management as their major:

*"I think because my parents own a restaurant, I've always been the restaurant and I'd want to do something different. I'd like to find some other career opportunities available from other majors."* (R7)

*"I've heard hospitality major, but, like, it's not something that even my family recommended to me, so I didn't think too much about it, you know."* (R11)

The above excerpted interviews show that another major constraint directly preventing potential students selecting H&T management as their major could be the discouraging effect from students' parents. In particular, the students' inter-

ests in selecting H&T management as their major could be adversely affected when their parents' involvement in the hospitality industry could not provide students with the favorable impression and their parents do not know the industry very well. Concerning such influential impact played by students' parents in their process of major-selection, it is necessary to share with students' parents enough information about the major and provide students with a whole picture of the profession represented by the major to alleviate the side effects caused by the one-side-of-story demonstrated by the students' parents.

The last but not least, another important constraint identified from the interviews is related to the courses offered by H&T management programs. For example, one of study subjects shared:

*"Yeah, so, originally like coming in the school I wanted to do the hospitality, but I thought we had to take a language and I had struggled in high school. So, I thought the best choice for me due to that would be going to business management."* (R9)

As revealed in the above excerpted interview, the tough experience of taking certain types of courses required by the H&T management programs could be one of major concerns for the potential major students to select the H&T management as their major. Taking such factor into consideration, it appears that H&T management programs may offer more flexible and tailor-made course options for their students by identifying their strength and weakness.

Based on the analysis of collected interviews, the present study has located some important con-

straints and these identified constraints provide helpful explanation about why some potential major students did not select the H&T management as their major originally. Such findings indicate that students' major-selection process could be affected by the factors from students' personal side, their parents' side, and the H&T management programs side. An in-depth analysis of the constraints identified in the present study has revealed the possible solutions and strategies the H&T management programs could take to help the potential major students overcome the constraints, which prevent them from selecting H&T management as their major. More significantly, different from the previous research, the present study focused on the switching-major students, who have been overlooked in the previous studies, and provided a more comprehensive view of the major-selectin process by learning their concerns and difficulties in selecting H&T management as their major.

## **5. Conclusion**

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Different from the previous research which has primarily focused on identifying the major factors motivating students to select the H&T management as their major, the present study targets at another side of story, the constraints preventing students from selecting the H&T management as their major. In particular, the present study does not like the previous research which treated the students studying in the H&T management programs as a whole uniform entity but recognizes the fact that among them there are a number of students switching from other majors. By targeting at this particular group of students, the pres-

ent study is aiming to facilitate students' major-selection process, so they can directly and more quickly find their desirable majors and eventually complete their degree in a more time-efficient and cost-effective way. Meanwhile, the study results will be helpful to develop the more effective recruitment solutions and strategies for the H&T management programs by removing those identified constraints which prevent potential students from selecting H&T management as their major. As a result, the more excellent major students can be recruited, and eventually the more qualified graduates will be available in the job market for the H&T industry.

To comply with the fact that many students in the H&T management programs are switching-major students, the current study selected a H&T management program, in which almost 40% of its students were switching-major students. Through data analysis, three major types of constraints were identified. From students' personal side, the key factors inhibiting them to select H&T management as their major are their absence of information about the career opportunities offered by H&T management field and their misunderstanding about the name of major. From students' parents' side, the influential elements include students' unfavorable impressions about H&T industry based on their parents' experiences in the industry and their parents' unfamiliarity with the industry. Last, from the H&T management programs side, the curriculum design could be a critical cause for some potential students to avoid selecting the H&T management as their major.

Based on the findings from the present study, some solutions and strategies to help students

overcome the identified constraints can be suggested as the practical implications of the study findings. To deal with the factors from students' personal part, the H&T management programs should provide adequate profession guidance to the potential major students and name their programs in a more perceptible way. In particular, since H&T management is a career-oriented major, it appears important to form a clearer picture about the career paths available for the potential major students to pursue on when introducing the programs to them and create a direct and close link between the name of program and the profession it represents. For example, rather than naming their programs with a generic term, such as hospitality, the programs could be more easily recognized by prospective major students through adopting the more career-related terms, such as hotels, restaurants, tourism, and special events, etc.. To handle the influence from students' parents' aspect, it is necessary for the H&T management programs to share with students' parents enough information about their programs and provide students with a whole picture of the profession represented by the major to alleviate the side effects caused by the one-side-of-story demonstrated by the students' parents. For instance, when prospective students and their parents are invited to participate in the on-campus events, H&T programs should invite the successful alumni or advisory board members from the industry to provide their successful stories with both students and their parents, and also provide students the opportunities to build network with those professionals and leaders and find their mentors. Last, the H&T management programs

should also focus on its own perspective by offering more flexible and tailor-made course options for their students based on students' strength and weakness. Concerning the diversified nature of prospective students, the H&T management programs should take more feasible channels to know their students. For example, providing more personal touch to students during freshmen orientation sessions and offering more customized degree-seeking paths during the academic advising sessions.

As the H&T industry is expanding rapidly at the global level, the demand for the qualified professionals with a formal education in H&T management is also rapidly growing. To respond such increasing demand from industry, the post-secondary institutions should not only offer more H&T programs, but more importantly develop solutions and strategies to find out and recruit more outstanding students and help them engage with the programs as early as possible. By locating the fundamental causes preventing the potential students from selecting the H&T management as their major and providing the feasible suggestions for further improvement in recruiting potential major students, the present study could build a solid foundation for the future studies in this subject by focusing on other different countries and regions, as well as various disciplines.

Although the present research provides valuable insights, the results did not come without limitations, which could direct future research areas. The primary limitation of the current study rests in its sampling. This study cannot claim to be representative of all H&T management programs in the United States because it

only focused on one specific H&T management program, which may make it difficult to apply the findings to all different programs and institutions. In particular, this study only examined the undergraduate students, so it is not known what could be the major constraints for graduate students to select H&T management as their major. To overcome such limitation, a cross-institutional study including both undergraduate and graduate students should be conducted in the future. Another limitation of this study is the difficulty in applying the study results in other countries and regions which practice the different major selection policies. For example, unlike the United States, some countries and regions do not have the flexible major selection policies and put the restrictions on changing majors. So, the future studies may focus on those countries and regions and examine what could be the major constraints for students to select their majors before they are accepted by the universities or other educational institutions.

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