

Marketing Students' Perception of Retailing as a Career Option

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Abstract: As retail companies continue to seek ways to increase revenue streams and grow their business, firms may increase the number of graduates employed by the firm. However, negative perceptions among university students potential graduate entrants to the industry towards working in retailing may result in the retail firm's failure to attract and retain most qualified employees. The purpose of this study was to explore marketing students perception of retailing as a possible career option. A total of 271 marketing students were surveyed using variables identified in previous research. Key findings of this study include the following. First parents, friends/relatives working in the field and personal work experience have the greatest influences on students career decisions. Second, students in general were ambivalence toward a career in the industry. Third, certain segments of student population are more disposed towards retailing, as a career option. The findings of this study have implications for marketing educators and the industry.

Key words: Perceptions, undergraduates, retailing, career, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The impressive growth of the Malaysian economy over the last 2 decades, combined with intensified globalization and social influences have led to a retail boom in the country. The retailing industry has become one of major contributors to the nation's Gross National Income (GNI), contributing about RM114.4 billion in 2011 and RM125 billion in 2012. By the year 2020, the industry is expected to boost the nation's total GNI by RM156 billion (PEMANDU, 2014). Recognizing its importance, serious effort have been made to expand the sector by creating an attractive business climate for domestic and foreign investments, as well as making large scale government investments in the industry. A principal argument made for encouraging the development of retailing is that it creates a considerable number of jobs, both directly in the sector in which consumer expenditure occurs and more widely via inter-industry linkages. Approximately, 2.1 million people are currently employed in the retailing industry and it directly accounts for 16.6% of all Malaysian employment in 2012. Over the next few years, >400,000 job opening are expected in retail trade sales (PEMANDU, 2014). This need for entry-level employees indicates that university students will be likely be in high demand for entry-level management positions.

Surprisingly, however while the job market in the retail industry continues to grow each year, retail companies experience increased difficulty in attracting graduates to fill open management positions. There are

many factors contributing to the problem and negative disposition toward the industry is one of them (Rahim, 2012). This situation is not unique to Malaysia, past evidence from the USA and UK also indicates that many students appear to associate a career in retailing, as a predominantly store-based and this is attributed with negative descriptors, such as dull, low compensation, highly routine, hard work, boring and poor working hours (Swinyard, 1981; Swinyard *et al.*, 1991; Broadbridge, 2003a). There is some evidence that attitudes toward retailing may be improving (Commins and Preston, 1997) but the overall image remains negative. There are also reports of many business graduates leaving the industry or even failing to enter the industry on graduation due to poor employment conditions and little job satisfaction (Rhoads *et al.*, 2002). Consequently, the retailing industry has a reputation for high managerial turnover (Rhoads *et al.*, 2002; Peterson, 2007) and it has difficulty in attracting good quality managers (Commins and Preston, 1997). These negative reputations and recruitment difficulties are further exacerbated by changes in millennial generation's attitude to work and in career structures (Martin, 2005; Oliver, 2006).

This study aimed to explore marketing students perception of retailing as a possible career option. The objectives of this study were to outline the key influences in career choice decisions, summarize the attributes students associate with a career in retailing and identify the student segment who are more likely to have a positive images of retailing as a career. Better understanding of students perceptions regarding

retailing, as career is beneficial for educators as they prepare students for retail careers. Such information can provide opportunities for improving pedagogical approaches in university business programs in order to make careers in retailing more attractive. The retailing industry, as a whole could also benefit from a clearer understanding of how the future workforce views employment in the retailing industry. This information could be used as a reference for retail firms to work on improving aspects of working conditions within the industry. Furthermore by identifying segments of the student population who are predisposed toward retailing, as a career, retail companies are more likely recruit long-term employees, thus reducing turnover costs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study was carried out on undergraduate marketing students enrolled in the School of Maritime Business and Management, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu during the 2013-2014 academic year. The study employed a quantitative approach through the use of self-administered, anonymous questionnaire survey. A quantitative approach and questionnaires were considered the most appropriate method for data collection, as it allowed for a systematic collection of quantifiable data on a set of pre-determined variables. At the same time, it enabled the maximization of responses. Questionnaire items were developed from a detailed review of variables used in the previous research of Swinyard (1981), Swinyard *et al.* (1991) and Broadbridge (2003a, b) with the intention of replication where possible to aid in comparison of the results.

Students were accessed during class time to secure a high return rate. A questionnaire was administered to all students in attendance. The students were informed that participation in the study is purely voluntary and were asked to return the questionnaire blank, if they did not wish to be involved. This method of data collection was chosen in order to eliminate bias on the part of the researcher. Questionnaire completion time was estimated at 10 min. This collection method resulted in 330 returned questionnaires. However, after elimination of 59 questionnaires with incomplete or unlikely response pattern, 271 respondents were included in the final sample. The effective usable response rate of usable surveys, therefore was 82%.

The processing and analyzing of data were performed using the descriptive and statistical methods available in the statistical package for the social sciences, version 15.0 for Windows. Frequencies, 2-sample t-tests and χ^2 -tests were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS

Description of sample: The majority of the respondents were female (80.1%) and this depicts the scenario of Malaysia universities with female students making up two thirds of student enrollment. Ages ranged from 20-33, the mean age being 22.3 years. With regard to race, the largest proportion of the respondents was Malays, accounting for 69.7% of the total sample. The majority of students were in 2nd year (40.2%), 35% were in 3rd year and 24.7% in 1st year. The 32.1% students have taken retail management course.

Career decision influences: Students were asked about various people or factors in helping them obtain career information and to make a career decision. Students answered using a 5-point Likert scale with one corresponding to very influential. Table 1 summarizes the sources influences student indicate on their career choices. Parents and friends/relatives working in the field were the 2 most influential personal sources that affected career choice decisions. Personal work experience was rated, as the 3rd most influential factor in assisting their career choice. All these factors reflect work by Broadbridge (2003a) and demonstrate the importance of personal influences and work experience in influencing career choice.

The fact that exposures to firms on campus (e.g., info sessions, guest speakers) are the 4th most influencing factor suggests an opportunity for retailers to fully utilize campus resources, such as classes and information sessions in order to reach out to students and influence their career choice. Curriculum materials and lecturers were also influential in helping students to decide on a career. While exposures to firms in media had some influence, the importance of company brochures were less apparent. Surprisingly, company websites were also not ranked among the most influential factors given the evidence indicating the rise in the availability and usage of the internet by university students (Sam *et al.*, 2005).

Table 1: Important people and factors in helping career decisions

People/factors	Mean
Parents	2.16
Friends/relatives working in the field	2.22
Personal work experience	2.27
Exposures to firms on campus	2.45
Curriculum materials	2.45
Lecturer	2.49
Exposures to firms in media	2.54
Siblings	2.61
Career advisors	2.61
Company websites	2.67
Company brochures	2.70
Friends	2.76

The smaller the mean, the greater the influence; n = 271

Table 2: Attributes associated with a career in retailing

Attribute/descriptor	Agreement (%)
Positive/neutral attributes	
Consumer oriented	84
Management responsibility	75
Opportunities for advancement	74
Challenging	70
Require me to be mobile	69
People oriented	65
Interesting	65
Creative	61
Opportunities for training and development	61
Diversified work	60
Rewarding	58
Opportunity to use initiative	56
Independent	56
Degree related	56
Exciting	56
A good salary	54
Changing, dynamic	53
Competitive	51
Satisfying	49
Prestigious	40
Prestige/status oriented	27
Negative attributes	
Hard work	67
Physically demanding	62
Routine	48
Hectic	47
Mundane	32
Limited advancement	31
Unsociable hours	29
Poor working hours	19
Poor salary	13

All the percentages in Table 2 have been rounded to the nearest whole number

Personal sources; such as siblings, career advisors and friends also had the least influence on students career choices.

Attributes associated with a career in retailing: Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement of disagreement about whether a career in retailing possesses a set of 30 job attributes. Frequency counts were made of responses to the items. For simplicity, the percentage of those who strongly agreed or agreed were combined into a single category, thus measuring the overall perception for the attribute. Table 2 displays the percentage of students ratings of the positive/neutral attributes associated with a career in retailing. When examining the total sample by percentage for each item, the top 5 qualities identified as hallmarks of retailing career were ordered as follows:

- Consumer oriented (84%)
- Management responsibility (75%)
- Opportunities for advancement (74%)
- Challenging (70%)
- Require me to be mobile (69%)

It is interesting to note that consumer oriented is the only item receiving the highest percentage of agreement from over 80% of respondents. This finding collaborates previous researches that indicated that consumer oriented was among the top 3 attributes associated with a career in retailing mentioned freely by students (Swinyard, 1981; Swinyard *et al.*, 1991; Broadbridge, 2003b).

Almost two thirds of students rated a career in retailing, as people oriented, interesting, creative, providing opportunities for training and development and diversified work. Just over half of students found jobs in the retailing industry rewarding, providing the opportunity to use initiative and independent. Similarly retailing careers were seen as degree related, exciting, offering a good salary, changing, dynamic and competitive. This suggests that students seemed to be divided into 2 about the nature of work, pay and promotion opportunities in the industry, about half evaluating favorably and the other half unfavorably. It seems that the majority of the respondents did not believe that retailing is a prestigious vocation, as shown by the low percentage of those who agreed with the item prestigious (40%) and prestige/status oriented (27%).

Table 2 also displays the percentage of students ratings of the negative attributes associated with a career in retailing. More than half of students rated a career in retailing as hard work (67%) and physically demanding (62%) while nearly half of them regard a career in retailing as routine (48%) and hectic (47%). About one third of the students tended to agree that a career in retailing was mundane (32%), offering limited advancement (31%) and having unsociable hours (29%). This finding is compatible with the finding of a previous survey conducted by Broadbridge (2003b) among undergraduate management students in the UK.

Student segment likely to have a positive images of retailing as a career: The analysis sets out to identify perceptual similarities and differences among attributes associated with a career in retailing. About 2 sample t-tests were used to test whether a statistical difference between 2 sample mean for a single dependent variable, in this case students perceptions of attributes associated with a career in retailing and the independent groups that is gender, race, retail course and academic performance. The null hypothesis that there is no difference in mean between groups is rejected, if the t-statistic is sufficiently large to be significant. An alpha level of 0.05 was used for the t-tests where a significance level $p < 0.05$ shows that there is a significant difference at 95% confidence level and a significance level $p > 0.05$ suggests, there is no significant difference between groups. For brevity and

to avoid repetition, researchers report only those findings in which a statistically significant difference was identified.

Turning 1st to gender differences, 4 significant differences were discovered. Male students tended to agree more with mundane (mean: 2.54 vs. 2.93, $p = 0.025$) whereas female students tended to agree more with exciting (mean: 2.21 vs. 2.63, $p = 0.003$) and management responsibility (mean: 1.90 vs. 2.22, $p = 0.029$). Furthermore, female students perceived that a career in retailing would offer more opportunities for training and development (mean: 2.20 vs. 2.54, $p = 0.02$). This finding suggests that female students are more favorably predisposed toward retailing than males.

The Malay students' perceptions of a career in retailing were found to be significantly different from the non-Malay's on 15 of the 30 job attributes. Malay students more strongly agreed that a career in retailing would be interesting (mean: 2.01 vs. 2.62, $p = 0.001$), exciting (mean: 2.18 vs. 2.56, $p = 0.002$), rewarding (mean: 2.23 vs. 2.57, $p = 0.009$), creative (mean: 2.08 vs. 2.59, $p = 0.001$) would offer an opportunity to use initiative (mean: 2.29 vs. 2.59, $p = 0.035$) and that they would enjoy the challenges of the career (mean: 1.94 vs. 2.35, $p = 0.001$). Furthermore, Malays tended to agree more with these statements/perceptions: Degree related (mean: 2.25 vs. 2.66, $p = 0.008$), a good salary (mean: 1.94 vs. 2.35, $p = 0.001$), opportunities for advancement (mean: 1.84 vs. 2.35, $p = 0.001$), opportunities for training and development (mean: 2.17 vs. 2.49, $p = 0.012$) and management responsibility (mean: 1.85 vs. 2.23, $p = 0.003$). They also tended to agree more that a career in retailing is consumer oriented (mean: 1.62 vs. 1.85, $p = 0.035$) and people oriented (mean: 1.97 vs. 2.48, $p = 0.001$); the task would be physically demanding (mean: 2.12 vs. 2.68; $p = 0.001$) and that it requires a hard work (mean: 1.94 vs. 2.67, $p = 0.001$).

About 5 significant differences were indicated with respect to retail course. As found by Swinyard *et al.* (1991) and Broadbridge (2003b), those students in the current study who have taken a retail course were significantly more likely to be favorable in their descriptions of retailing as a career. Students who have taken a retail course were significantly more likely than others to believe that retailing is challenging (mean: 1.91 vs. 2.14, $p = 0.05$), offers a good salary (mean: 2.10 vs. 2.37, $p = 0.032$), diversified work (mean: 2.07 vs. 2.34, $p = 0.029$) and rapidly changing, dynamic (mean: 2.13 vs. 2.54, $p = 0.001$). Surprisingly, they also tended to agree more that a career in retailing provide a limited opportunities for advancement (mean: 3.01 vs. 3.36, $p = 0.027$).

About 4 significant differences were uncovered with respect to academic performance. The less academically-able students (i.e., those with lower CGPA) more agreed that a career in retailing would be interesting (mean: 2.03 vs. 2.36, $p = 0.011$) would offer more opportunities for advancement (mean: 1.88 vs. 2.22, $p = 0.01$), offers a good salary (mean: 2.00 vs. 2.53, $p = 0.001$) and degree related (mean: 2.15 vs. 2.53, $p = 0.015$). This finding is similar to those of Swinyard (1981) and Swinyard *et al.* (1991), indicating that retail companies may not be attracting the top performing students.

Students' retail career intention: While a positive attitude toward a career in retailing is desirable in students, it is of little value to the recruiter unless the student actively considers retailing as a career possibility. Students in this study were, therefore asked to indicate their intention of choosing such a career. The finding indicates that marketing students in general were ambivalence about pursuing a career in retailing. About one third of the students (35.8%) intended to pursue a retail career upon graduation, 10% were not planning to and the remaining 54.2% claimed to be undecided. The factor contributing to this finding may be that marketing students have paid more attention to possible careers in marketing and they realize that retailing is not the only option. If students were made aware of the opportunities of retail careers, some more may be persuaded to consider it as a career option.

Another step in the data analysis involved examination of associations between students retail career intention and the following variables: Gender, race, retail course and Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). A cross-tabulation and Chi-square test were used to test for the significance of associations between these variables (Table 3). Statistical relationships were considered significant, if they equaled or exceeded the 5% level of probability. Cross-tabulation analysis revealed that the relationship between retail career intention and gender was not significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating that students retail career intention was not related to their gender. The analysis shows a significant relationship ($\chi^2 = 15.572$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$) between race and retail career intention. The majority of Malay respondents (83%) reported that they intend to enter the retailing industry upon graduation, compared with 18.3% of non-Malays. This result indicates that for the non-Malay students, retailing does not appear to be a desired career path.

Among the students who have taken a retail course, 49.4% reported that they intended to pursue a career in

Table 3: Cross-tabulations and Chi-square test results

Categories	Intend on retail career (%)	Undecided (%)	Do not intend on retail career (%)	χ^2	df	Sig.
Gender						
Male	27.8	55.6	16.7	4.214	2	0.118
Female	37.8	53.9	8.3			
Race						
Malay	43.4	47.6	9.0	15.572	2	0.000
Non-Malay	18.3	69.5	12.2			
Retail course						
Taken a retail course	49.4	44.8	5.7	10.862	2	0.004
Not taken a retail course	29.5	58.5	12.0			
Academic performance						
CGPA below 2.99	46.2	47.0	6.8	10.476	2	0.005
CGPA above 3.00	25.0	62.0	13.0			

retailing, compared with 29.5% students who have not taken a retail course. The Chi-square statistic was significant for this cross-tabulation ($\chi^2 = 10.862$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$). This result suggest that exposure to information about retail management raised, the level of attractiveness of retail careers through participating in a retail course. A significant relationship ($\chi^2 = 10.476$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$) was observed between retail career intention and academic performance. About 46.2% students with CGPA below 2.99 indicated they intend to pursue a retail career, compared with 25% of students with CGPA above 3.00. It appears that the best and brightest students, that is higher CGPAs are not attracted to retail careers. This should be of concern to retail companies looking to universities as a pool for top candidates.

CONCLUSION

Undergraduate students in marketing are a highly desirable source for the retail industry because they are more likely to enter the sector and are expected to fill managerial and professional positions. In light of this, marketing educators and employers should be alert to university students perceptions and the need to assist them appropriately to develop a career in the retailing industry. Educators should foster greater awareness and understanding in the classroom about the attractiveness of retail career. Retailing should be promoted by emphasizing the positive aspects of retail jobs to encourage students to take up retail related careers. These educational efforts are necessary, since students are unaware that retail careers offer valued job attributes. Educators can, also invite successful business leaders to speak, at least for one class session about his/her experience and answer students questions about career opportunities in the industry. Having a retail professional share his/her ideas and experiences can go a long way toward developing a realistic perspective for students.

Mentoring programs could, also be implemented to help students in their decision-making processes and alleviate students concerns regarding retail careers.

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study should be viewed in light of the following limitations. About 1 major limitation of this study is that the sample was comprised of students from only one public university where respondents were probably not representative of all students in Malaysia, thus reducing the generalizability of the results. Large sample sizes from different universities might be utilized to increase generalizability of the findings. Another limitation is the fact that the students surveyed were marketing students. Surveying non-marketing majors may provide a sharper and more delineated indication of the real perceptions are of divergent groups.

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