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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste

The dissertation journey during the COVID-19 pandemic: Crisis or opportunity?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

COVID-19
Pandemic
Dissertation writing
Attribution theory
Self-efficacy theory

ABSTRACT

Despite dissertation's significance in enhancing the quality of scholarly outputs in tourism and hospitality fields, insufficient research investigates the challenges and disruptions students experience amidst a public health crisis. This study aims to fill the research gaps and integrate attribution and self-efficacy theories to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influences students' decision-making and behaviours during the dissertation writing process. Qualitative exploration with 15 graduate students was conducted. The results indicate that adjustment of data collection approaches was the most shared external challenge, while students' religious background and desire for publishing COVID related topics were primary internal motivations.

1. Introduction

Dissertation writing is an essential part of academic life for graduate students (Yusuf, 2018). By writing the dissertation, students can build research skills to analyse new data and generate innovative concepts to inform future scientific studies (Fadhly et al., 2018; Keshavarz & Shekari, 2020). Therefore, scholars in higher education are dedicated to guiding students to complete impactful dissertations. Duffy et al. (2018) note that thesis advisors can empower students to explore novel ideas and identify new products or services for the tourism and hospitality industry beyond the traditional contribution of extending the existing research literature. Namely, the intriguing ideas proposed in students' dissertations will eventually enrich and diversify the literature in the tourism and hospitality academia. Furthermore, the process of identifying impactful ideas will prepare students for a successful career either as a researcher or practitioner.

However, dissertation writing can be a challenging experience for both native and non-native writers. Students are sometimes confused about the characteristics of the dissertation or the expectations from the academics and practitioners (Bitchener et al., 2010). A graduate student has to make numerous decisions during the dissertation writing journey. To successfully guide the students through this complicated writing journey, thesis advisors need to understand the factors influencing students' writing motivation and decision-making process. Previous studies have suggested these influential factors can be broadly classified into external sources (e.g., advisor/supervisor's influence, trends in the field, or publishability of the topic) and internal sources (e.g., researcher's background or researcher interest; Fadhly et al., 2018; Anson & Smith, 2004; Keshavarz & Shekari, 2020). Despite this classification, the discussions related to the impacts of macro-environments, such as socio-cultural trends, economic conditions, or ecology and physical environments, on students' dissertation writing are extremely lacking. Since the time background and the world situation when writing a

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2022.100374>

Received 15 May 2021; Received in revised form 27 January 2022; Accepted 17 February 2022

Available online 21 February 2022

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dissertation are also critical factors influencing students’ writing goals, more research should be done to broaden students’ dissertation writing experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has immensely impacted global education, students’ learning, and research activities. According to Dwivedi et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has affected international higher education leading to the closure of schools to control the spread of the virus. Meanwhile, Alvarado et al. (2021) found that the global health crises have seriously disrupted doctoral students’ Dissertations in Practice (DiP). Specifically, students must learn new methodologies and adjust the research settings and sampling techniques because of virtual-only approaches. Some have to find new topics and research questions since the original one cannot be investigated during the quarantine period. However, students may turn this current crisis into an opportunity as they build a shared community and support each other’s private and academic lives. Apparently, the crisis can result in a stronger bond of friendship, and this may generate more collaborative research projects in the future.

As mentioned earlier, some studies have tried to identify factors influencing students’ dissertation writing journey, albeit lack considerations related to the effects of macro-environments. Given the severe impacts of COVID-19 on the macro-environments of global higher education and the tourism industry, this study aims to fill the research gap and explore how a public health crisis may influence graduate students’ dissertation writing, especially in the field of tourism and hospitality. Specifically, this study utilizes attribution and self-efficacy theory as the research framework to examine the internal and external factors that influenced graduate students’ dissertation journey amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (see Fig. 1). The use of attribution and self-efficacy theory is appropriate in the current study because both explain how people make sense of society, influences of others, their decision-making process and behaviours. Although some may argue these theories are outdated, many scholars have used them to explain students’ behaviours and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Xu et al. (2021) found that social capital and learning support positively influence students’ self-efficacy, employability and well-being amidst the crisis. Meanwhile, Lassoued et al. (2020) used attribution theory to explore the university professors and their students’ learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that both groups attributed the problems to reaching high quality in distance learning to students’ weak motivation to understand abstract concepts in the absence of in-person interaction.

Understanding the lived experience of students would enable stakeholders in tourism and hospitality education to deeply comprehend the plight and predicaments of students face and the innovate ways to mitigate those challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this study utilizes a qualitative approach to explore the impacts of internal and extremal factors on the dissertation writing process. The study was set in the context of an international graduate hospitality and tourism program in Taiwan known for its diverse student body. The research question that guides such qualitative exploration is: How have external and internal factors influenced graduate students’ dissertation writing journey during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This study is timely and critical considering the uncertainties that characterize pandemics which aggravates the already perplexities that associate dissertation writing. It throws light on factors that are susceptible to pandemic tendencies and factors that are resilient to crisis. The findings of this study would provide insights into how crises affect academia and suggest effective ways for higher educational institutions, academicians, and other key stakeholders to forge proactive solutions for future occurrences. Especially, higher education institutions would be well-positioned and informed on areas to train students and faculty members to ameliorate the impacts associated with pandemics.

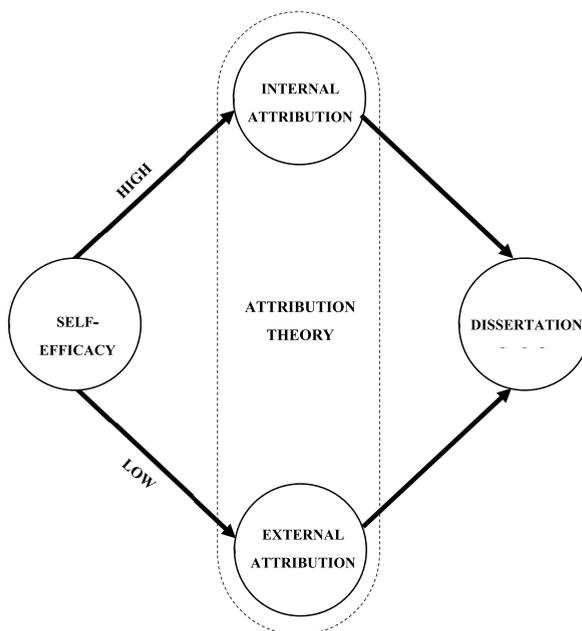


Fig. 1. The theoretical framework.

2. Literature review

2.1. COVID-19 and its impacts on educational activities

Public health crises have ramifications for educational behaviour and choices; this is especially true of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most countries and institutions of higher education are still battling with the consequences suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, there has been a tsunami of studies on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Dwivedi et al., 2020; Manzano-Leon et al., 2021; Alam & Parvin, 2021). Assessing these studies, we found that although there are substantial extant studies on the negative implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, limited studies have also emphasised the positive side of the pandemic on education. For example, Dwivedi et al. (2020) concluded that the COVID-19 had revealed the necessity of online teaching in higher educational institutions. For they observed that at Loughborough, though face-to-face teaching is practised, one cannot relegate online teaching as some students will be unable to return to campus due to border closures. Thus, faculty members have to convert existing material to the online format. Furthermore, Manzano-Leon et al. (2021) also pointed out that the COVID-19 has allowed students to interact with their peers beyond traditional education. They pinpointed that playful learning strategies such as escape rooms enable students to interact well. Alam and Parvin (2021) also underscored students who studied during the COVID-19 pandemic performed better academically than those before. This finding suggests that online education is supposedly more active than face-to-face mode.

Apart from these positive implications aforementioned, most studies have emphasised the negative impacts of COVID-19 on education. Dwivedi et al. (2020) reviewed how the global higher education sector has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It caused the closure of schools, national lockdowns and social distancing, and a proliferation of online teaching. COVID-19 forced both teachers and students to work and study remotely from home. According to Dhawan (2020), the rapid deployment of online learning to protect students, faculty, communities, societies, and nations affected academic life. Online learning seemed like a panacea in the face of COVID-19's severe symptoms; however, the switch to online also brought several challenges for teachers and students. Lall and Singh (2020) noted that disadvantages of online learning include the absence of co-curricular activities and students' lack of association with friends at school. Many studies have also confirmed the pandemic's adverse effects on students' mental health, emotional wellbeing, and academic performance (Bao, 2020; de Oliveira Araújo et al., 2020).

Despite the pandemic has caused numerous difficulties for many educational institutions, scholars and educators have risen to the challenges and tried to plan effective strategies to mitigate such stressing circumstances. For example, to respond the needs of a better understanding of students' social-emotional competencies for coping the COVID-19 outbreak, Hadar et al. (2020) utilized the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) framework to analyse teachers and students' struggles. Each element of VUCA is defined as follows:

- Volatility: the speed and magnitude of the crisis;
- Uncertainty: the unpredictability of events during the crisis;
- Complexity: the confounding events during the crisis;
- Ambiguity: the confusing and mixed meanings during the crisis.

This analysis and conceptualization of crises help to explain some of the students' concerns on mental health, emotional wellbeing, and academic performance (Bao, 2020; de Oliveira Araújo et al., 2020).

The pandemic also exacerbated existing challenges facing students and universities across the globe. According to Rose-Redwood et al. (2020), the COVID-19 endangered the career prospects of both students and scholars. University partnerships with the arts sector, community service, and non-governmental organizations also suffered. The tourism and hospitality (academic) field faced unique challenges in light of COVID-19 without exception. Forms of tourism such as over-tourism and cruise tourism were temporarily unobservable, and most pre-crisis studies and forecast data were no longer relevant (Bausch et al., 2021). Consequently, many empirical and longitudinal studies were halted due to the incomparability of data. Even though many studies have been conducted to explore the impacts of the COVID pandemic on educational activities, none of these studies has addressed how this public health crisis has affected graduate students' dissertation journey. Therefore, the present research is needed to fill the gaps in the mainstream literature.

2.2. Attribution theory and self-efficacy

The current study employs attribution theory and self-efficacy to understand graduate students' dissertation writing journeys. Attribution theory explains how individuals interpret behavioural outcomes (Weiner, 2006) and has been used in education and crisis management (Abraham et al., 2020; Sanders et al., 2020). For example, Chen and Wu (2021) used attribution theory to understand the effects of attributing students' academic achievements to giftedness. They found that attributing students' academic success to giftedness had a positive indirect relationship with their academic achievement through self-regulated learning and negative learning emotions. However, attribution theory has been criticised for its inability to explain a person's behaviour comprehensively. This is well enunciated by Bandura (1986) that attribution theory does not necessarily describe all influential factors related to a person's behaviour. Instead, it provides in-depth accounts of one's self-efficacy. Hence, scholars have advocated the need for integrating self-efficacy into attribution theory (Hattie et al., 2020).

Self-efficacy is closely related to attribution theory. Extant studies have investigated the essence of self-efficacy in education and its role on students' achievements (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; Hendricks, 2016). For instance, in their educational research and implications for music, Hendricks (2016) found that teachers can empower students' ability and achievement through positive

self-efficacy beliefs. This is achieved through Bandura's (1986) theoretical four sources of self-efficacy: vicarious experience, verbal/social persuasion, enactive mastery experience, and physiological and affective states. The current study integrates attribution theory and self-efficacy as the research framework to provide intellectual rigour and reasons underlined students' decision-making during their dissertation journey.

2.3. Internal and external factors that influence dissertation writing processes

This study considered both internal and external factors affecting graduate students' dissertation journeys in line with attribution theory. Internal factors are actions or behaviours within an individual's control (LaBelle & Martin, 2014; Weiner, 2006). Many studies have evolved and attributed dissertation topic selection to internal considerations. For instance, Anson and Smith's (2004) study found that personal interest and student ability were essential for undergraduate students' thesis topic selection. Keshavarz and Shekari (2020) also found that personal interest is the primary motivation for choosing a specific thesis topic. In another study focused on undergraduate students at the English department, Husin and Nurbayani (2017) revealed that students' language proficiency was a dominant internal factor for their dissertation choice decisions.

On the other hand, external factors are forces beyond an individual's control (LaBelle & Martin, 2014). Similar to internal factors, there is an avalanche of studies that have evolved and uncovered external factors that characterize students' dissertation decisions in the pre-COVID period (e.g., de Kleijn et al., 2012; Huin; Nurbayani, 2017; Keshavarz & Shekari, 2020; Pemberton, 2012; Shu et al., 2016; Sverdluk et al., 2018). For instance, de Kleijn et al. (2012) found that supervisor influence is critical in the student dissertation writing process. They further revealed that an acceptable relationship between supervisor and student leads to a higher and quality outcome; however, a high level of influence could lead to low satisfaction. Meanwhile, Pemberton (2012) delved into the extent teachers influence students in their dissertation process and especially topic selection. This study further underlined that most supervisors assist students to select topics that will sustain their interest and competence level. Unlike previous research, Keshavarz and Shekari (2020) found that research operability or feasibility was a critical external factor that informed students' dissertation decisions. In other words, practicality and usefulness are essential in determining the dissertation choices.

These studies above show how internal and external factors may determine students' dissertation decisions. Despite those studies providing valuable knowledge to broaden our understanding of which factors may play significant role in students' dissertation journeys, most of their focus was on undergraduate students and was conducted before COVID-19. Given that the learning experiences among graduate and undergraduate students as well as before and during the pandemic may differ significantly, there is a need to investigate what specific external and internal factors underline graduate students' dissertation decisions during the COVID-19. Are those factors different from or similar to previous findings?

3. Methodology

Previous studies have disproportionately employed quantitative approaches to examine students' dissertation topic choice (e.g., Keshavarz & Shekari, 2020). Although the quantitative method can aid the researcher to investigate focal phenomena among larger samples and generalize the results, it has also been criticized for the lack of in-depth analysis or does not allow respondents to share their lived experiences. Given the rapid evolution and uncertainty linked with the COVID-19 pandemic, the contextual and social factors may drive individuals to respond to such challenges differently. Therefore, efforts toward analyzing individual experiences during the public health crisis are necessary to tailor individual needs and local educational policy implementation (Tremblay et al., 2021). Accordingly, the current study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in the interpretivism paradigm to explore the factors affecting graduate students' dissertation research activities and understand the in-depth meaning of writing a dissertation.

3.1. Data collection

Since statistical representation is not the aim of qualitative research, the purposive sampling instead of probability sampling technique was used for this study (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). Graduate students who were composing their dissertation and could demonstrate a clear understanding on the issues under study are selected as the target research subjects. To gain a rich data, the sample selection in the current study considers background, dissertation writing status, and nationality to ensure a diversified data set (Ritchie et al., 2014). Data was collected from graduate students in Taiwan who were currently writing their dissertations. Taiwan was chosen as the research site because the pandemic initially had a minor impact on Taiwan than on other economically developed countries (Wang et al., 2020). In the first year (2019–2020) of their study, the graduate students could conduct their research projects without any restrictions. Therefore, traditional data collections and research processes, such as face-to-face interview techniques or onsite questionnaire distributions were generally taught and implemented in Taiwanese universities at that time. However, in their second year of the graduate program (2021), the COVID-19 cases surged, and the government identified some domestic infection clusters in Taiwan. Thus, the ministry of education ordered universities to suspend in-person instruction and move to online classes from home as part of a national level 3 COVID-19 alert. Many graduate students have to modify their data collection plan and learn different software to overcome the challenges of new and stricter rules. As they have experienced the sudden and unexpected change caused by the COVID-19 in their dissertation writing journey, Taiwanese graduate students are deemed as suitable research participants in this research.

Following Keshavarz and Shekari (2020), interview questions were extracted from the literature review and developed into a semi-structured guide. Semi-structured interview was employed allowing for probing and clarifying explanations. This also allowed

both the interviewer and the interviewee to become co-researchers (Ritchie et al., 2005). The questions asked about internal, and external factors influencing dissertation writing (including topic selection and methodology) during COVID-19. Specifically, students were asked how they chose their dissertation topic, how they felt COVID-19 had impacted their dissertation, and what significant events influenced their academic choices during the pandemic. Before each interview, the purpose of the study was explained and respondents provided informed consent. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Interviews, lasting about 50–60 min, were conducted with 15 graduate students as data saturation was achieved after analysing 15 interviews. The saturation was confirmed by the repetition of statements like, “personal interest motivated me”, “my supervisor guided me to select a topic”, and “I changed my data collection procedure to online”.

3.2. Data analysis and trustworthiness

Before the formal interview, two educational experts who are familiar with qualitative research were solicited to validate the wording, semantics, and meanings of the interview questions. Then, a pilot test was conducted with three graduate students to check the clarity of the expression for every interview question and revise potentially confusing phrasing. Validity and trustworthiness were also achieved through the use of asking follow-up questions. The transcripts of formal interviews were analysed using Atlas.ti 9. Qualitative themes were developed following open, selective, and axial coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Finally, the relationships among themes and codes were identified, facilitating the research findings and discussions.

In order to prevent biases from affecting the findings of the study, series of procedures were undertaken following previous qualitative research. First, multiple quotations from respondents underlined the research findings which meant the respondents’ true perspectives and expressions were represented. Moreover, the analyses were done independently and there was peer checking among the authors. There was also member checking where themes found were redirected to respondents for verification. In addition, external validation of the themes was done by asking other graduate students who share similar characteristics for comparability assessment to make the findings transferable.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Profile of respondents

Respondents were purposively drawn from diverse backgrounds (including nationality, gender, and programs) to enrich the research findings. The sample includes graduate students who began dissertation writing in Taiwan during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The majority of the respondents are female and from South East Asia. Table 1 provides background information of these interviewees.

4.2. Internal factors

As Table 2 depicts, the themes ascertained from the data analysis were categorised according to internal and external factors which underpin the attribution theory (Weiner, 2006). In consonance with previous studies, graduate students’ dissertation writing during the pandemic was influenced by internal factors (i.e., personal interest and religious background) and external considerations (i.e., career aspirations, society improvement, language issues, supervisor influence, COVID-19 publishable topics, data collection challenges). The analyses of each factor are presented below.

The most salient internal factors affecting dissertation topic selection were (1) personal interest and (2) religious background. For personal interest, respondent 1 expressed:

Table 1
Background information of study respondents.

	Gender	Nationality
Respondent 1	Female	Vietnam
Respondent 2	Male	Indonesia
Respondent 3	Female	Indonesia
Respondent 4	Male	Taiwan
Respondent 5	Female	Indonesia
Respondent 6	Female	Indonesia
Respondent 7	Male	Thailand
Respondent 8	Female	Philippines
Respondent 9	Female	China
Respondent 10	Female	Indonesia
Respondent 11	Female	Taiwan
Respondent 12	Female	Taiwan
Respondent 13	Female	Myanmar
Respondent 14	Male	Philippines
Respondent 15	Female	Indonesia

Table 2
Major themes and codes emerging from the data.

Dimension	Themes	Extracted codes	References
Internal factors	Personal interest	Personal preference; topic preference; personal priority; idiosyncratic; inner-conflict remedy; life motivation; delightful habit; nationality affiliation; empathy; personal aspiration in tourism destination development; personal desire.	I'Anson and Smith (2004); Keshavarz and Shekari (2020); Pemberton (2012); Post et al. (2017); Tedd, 2006
	Religious background	Religious belief as way of life; confidence when combining student religious belief with academic goals	Jeynes (2010); Logan (2013); Oukunlola et al. (2021)
External factors	Career aspirations	Development aspiration for own's country education; better career	I'Anson and Smith (2004); Jensen (2013); Millar (2013)
	Society improvement	Sustainability awareness in tourism destination; tourist arrival growth; destination economy development; women empowerment; alternative tourism development; job opportunity creation; livelihood improvement; solving environmental problem	Prebor (2010)
	Language and communication concern	Language barrier; common ease of communication due to same nationality	Franklin & Jaeger (2007)
	Supervisor influence	Topic idea from supervisor; supervisor's guidelines, consultation with supervisor; supervisor's suggestions; supervisor's contributions to student's decision making; supervisor's expertise in particulars area	Chu (2015); Lee and Deale (2016); Jensen (2013); Keshavarz and Shekari (2020); Xia (2013); Tuomaala et al. (2014)
	Impactful topics	Desire to find impactful topic	Keshavarz and Shekari (2020)
	Feasibility of research design	The method is appropriate with research gap; the design is suitable for data collection	Keshavarz and Shekari (2020)
	COVID-19 publishable topic	Desire for publishing paper; search for hot topic for publications	Keshavarz and Shekari (2020); McIltrout (2018)
Online data collection restrictions	Inability to conduct face-to-face interview; international travel ban; impact on research design; impact on methodology; impact on data collection process; deprivation of obtaining in-depth data; prevented to meet respondent; alteration from face-to-face interview into online interview (Zoom & Facebook Messenger); inability to read the respondents' body language; prone to several interruptions during online interview; affected conversation flow; remote interview leads to limited in-depth interview	Alvarado et al. (2021); Hadar et al. (2020)	

The first thing is that [it] comes from my interest. I'm currently working on solo female traveller [s], which is the market I want to study. So, the priority comes from my personal preference and to learn about this market no matter the external situation. I also think that this is due to how I was brought up. My parent nurtured me that way, and I love to do things independently, especially when travelling.

This finding is in line with previous studies such as Keshavarz and Shekari (2020); I'Anson and Smith (2004), who emphasised the relevance of personal interest in students' dissertation decision-making. Informed by the self-efficacy and attribution theories, we found that students who attribute their decision-making on dissertation writing to internal factors (i.e., personal interest) have relatively high self-efficacy levels. As argued by Bandura (1977), efficacy expectation is "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behaviour required to produce the outcomes" (p. 193). Namely, self-efficacy is determined by an individual's capability and ability to execute decisions independently, devoid of any external considerations. Despite the uncertainties and challenging circumstances amidst COVID-19, students who believe their ability and research skills usually adhere to their original dissertation topics and directions.

Religious consideration is another conspicuous factor informing graduate students' dissertation journey during the COVID-19 pandemic. As respondent 7 mentioned:

Islam has become my way of life. I am a Muslim. It is my daily life, so I like to research this. I was born into this faith, and I am inclined to explore Halal food. I feel committed to contributing my research to my faith no matter outside circumstances. Maybe if I combine it with academic (research), it will be easier to understand and easier to do.

Although not much has been seen regarding religious considerations in students' dissertation topic selection in previous studies, this research reveals religious background as a significant internal factor. From a sociology perspective, religious orientation and affiliation could affect individual behaviour (Costen et al., 2013; Lee & Robbins, 1998), and academic decision-making is not an exception. Religious backgrounds are inherent in the socialisation process and could affect how a person behaves or how they make a particular decision. This premise is further accentuated by Costen et al. (2013), who argued that social connectedness affects college students' ability to adjust to new environments and situations. Social connectedness guides feelings, thoughts, and behaviour in many human endeavours (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Social connectedness and upbringing underpin peoples' personality traits and behavioural patterns. Therefore, this study has extended existing literature on factors that affect graduate students' decision-making on dissertation writing from a religious perspective, which is traceable to an individual's socialisation process. In other words, during crises, most students are inclined to make decisions on their dissertation writing which are informed by their social upbringing (socialisation).

4.3. External factors

As [Table 2](#) indicates, abundant external factors inform graduate students' decision-making on their dissertation writing process. Except for career aspirations, language concerns, and supervisor influences that previous studies have recognized ([Chu, 2015](#); [Jensen, 2013](#); [Keshavarz & Shekari, 2020](#); [Lee & Deale, 2016](#); [Tuomaala et al., 2014](#)), some novel factors were identified from the data, such as "COVID-19 publishable topic" and "online data collection restrictions".

Unlike extant studies that have bemoaned the negative impacts of the COVID on education ([Qiu et al., 2020](#); [Sato et al., 2021](#)), the current study revealed that graduate students were eager to research on topics that were related to COVID-19 to reflect the changes of the tourism industry and trends.

Initially, overtourism [was] a problem in my country, and I want to write a dissertation about it. However, there is no tourism at my research site because of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, I had to change my topic to resilience because resilience is about overcoming a crisis. I had to discuss with my supervisor, and she suggested the way forward that I revise my topic to make it relevant and publishable due to the COVID-19 pandemic (respondent 8).

This response shows the unavoidable impacts of the COVID-19 on the research community. As [Bausch et al. \(2021\)](#) pointed out, tourism and hospitality scholars have to change their research directions because some forms of tourism such as overtourism and cruise tourism were temporarily unobservable amidst the pandemic. Thus, many pre-pandemic studies and forecast data were no longer relevant. However, the COVID-19 pandemic can bring some positive changes. Nowadays, the industry and academics shift their focus from pro-tourism to responsible tourism and conduct more research related to resilience. As [Ting et al. \(2021\)](#) suggested, "moving forward from the pandemic crisis, one of the leading roles of tourism scholars henceforth is to facilitate high-quality education and training to prepare future leaders and responsible tourism practitioners to contribute to responsible travel and tourism experiences." (p. 6).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has significant ramifications upon the research methods in hospitality and tourism. As respondent 1 denoted,

Because of [the] COVID-19 pandemic, there were certain limitations like I cannot analyse interviewee's body language due to social distancing ... some interruptions when we conduct online interviews due to unstable internet connectivity, which would ultimately affect the flow of the conversation.

The adjustments of research methods also bring frustrations and anxiety to students. For instance, respondent 3 expressed: "I became anxious that I won't be able to collect data because of social distancing, which was implemented in Taiwan." The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) feelings caused by the COVID-19 pandemic significantly influences students' mood, thinking and behaviour ([Hadar et al., 2020](#)).

Apparently, during crises, graduate students' decision-making on their dissertation writing was precipitated by external considerations beyond their control. Based on self-efficacy and attribution theory, the fear that characterises crises affects students' self-efficacy level and eagerness to resort to external entities (e.g., supervisor influences or difficulties in collecting data) to assuage their predicament. In other words, some students may have a low self-efficacy level during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was triggered by the negative impacts of the crisis. Furthermore, scholars may need to notice that COVID-19 is likely to affect conclusions drawn on studies undertaken during this period due to over-reliance on online data collection.

5. Conclusions and implications

Although numerous studies have been conducted to understand the influences of the COVID-19 crisis on educational activities, none of them focuses on the graduate student's dissertation writing journey. Given the significant contributions dissertations may make to advancing tourism and hospitality knowledge, this study aims to fill the gap and uses attribution and self-efficacy theories to explore how internal and external factors influenced graduate students' decision-making for dissertations amidst the crisis. Drawing on qualitative approaches with graduate students who began writing their dissertation during the COVID-19 period, the study provides insights into students' learning experiences and informs stakeholders in hospitality and tourism education to make better policies.

There are several findings worthy of discussion. Firstly, graduate students' sociological background (i.e., personal interest and religious background), which is inherent in an individual's socialisation processes, inform their decision-making in the dissertation processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with the self-efficacy theory, which argues that an individual has the conviction that they have the necessary innate abilities to execute an outcome ([Bandura, 1977](#)). Namely, respondents with high self-efficacy levels attributed their decisions to internal factors. Unlike previous studies' findings that personal interest was a factor that underpinned graduate students' decision-making ([T'Anson & Smith, 2004](#); [Keshavarz & Shekari, 2020](#)), it is observed that religious background is an additional factor that was evident and conspicuous during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, the complexity and uncertainty that characterised the COVID-19 pandemic made emotion a dominant factor that affected graduate students' dissertation journey and indirectly triggered other external factors that provoked behavioural adjustments among students. The trepidation and anxiety that COVID-19 has caused significantly affects the self-efficacy level of students and predisposes them to external considerations, such as the will of the supervisor or the difficulties in data collection, in their dissertation journey. This study paralleled previous research and revealed that respondents with low self-efficacy were influenced by external considerations more than individuals with high self-efficacy ([Bandura, 1977](#)). However, this study highlights how a public health crisis accelerates students who have low self-efficacy to attribute their unsatisfactory academic life to the external environment, leading to depression and negative impacts on ideology ([Abood et al., 2020](#)).

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically influenced the direction of research and body of knowledge in tourism and hospitality. This is seen in the light of the influx of COVID-19 related research topics adapted by graduate students. Furthermore, over-reliance on online data collection approaches were observed in this research. Although online surveys and interviews have many advantages, such as low cost and no geographic restrictions, the results drawn from this approach frequently suffer from biased data and issues with reliability and validity. For example, Moss (2020) revealed that survey respondents from Amazon MTurk are mostly financially disadvantaged, significantly younger than the U.S. population, and predominantly female. As more and more students collect data from online survey platforms such as Amazon MTurk, dissertation advisors may need to question the representativeness of the study respondents in their students' dissertation and the conclusions they make based on this population.

5.1. Theoretical implications and future study suggestions

This paper has extended the attribution and self-efficacy theories by revealing that a public health crisis moderates attributive factors that underpinned the decision-making of individuals. The integration of self-efficacy theory and attributive theory has proven to better unravel the behaviour of graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic than solely utilizing one of them. The application and extension of the self-efficacy and attribution theories are rarely observed in the context of hospitality and tourism education, and thus, this study creates the foundation for future scholars to understand students' attitudes and behaviour in our field.

The findings highlight some factors triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and have not been identified previously. For example, the religious background was a significant driver to selecting a particular research topic. This research also shows a shift in research direction to hot and publishable issues related to COVID-19. The utility of the dissertation becomes a significant consideration among graduate students. Additionally, emotion is recognized as another critical factor affecting the dissertation writing journey. The current study informs academia and the research community on the extent to which the COVID-19 would influence idea generation and the direction of research in the foreseeable future, as extant studies have overlooked this vital connection. Future studies should consider those factors when investigating relevant behaviours and experiences.

The time that the current study was done is likely to affect the findings. Therefore, it is recommended that future research explore graduate students' dissertation journey in the post-COVID-19 era to ascertain whether there will be similarities or differences. This would help to give a comprehensive picture of the impacts of the COVID-19 on education. Moreover, the findings of this study cannot be generalised as it was undertaken at a particular Taiwanese institution. We recommend that quantitative research with larger samples could be conducted to facilitate the generalisation of the findings. Finally, it is suggested that a meta-analysis or systematic literature review on articles written on the COVID-19 pandemic and education could be done to further identify more influential factors related to the public health crisis and educational activities.

5.2. Practical implications for hospitality and tourism education

The findings revealed that negative emotion might trigger students' attribution to external factors that affected the dissertation journey. Thus, relevant stakeholders should develop strategies and innovate ways to ease the fears and anxieties of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study calls for immediate actions to prevent spillover effects on upcoming students. Faculty members, staff, and teachers should be trained on soft skills such as empathy, flexibility, and conflict solutions required by the hospitality and tourism industry.

Moreover, the thesis supervisors should notice students' over-reliance on online data collection due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As it may possibly affect the quality and findings of their students' dissertations, there should be sound and logical justification for this decision. Collecting data online should be backed by the appropriateness of the method and the research problem under study instead of the convenience of obtaining such data. There is an urgent need for students to be guided for innovative data collection methods. The school can turn the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity to improve the online teaching materials and equipment. The research programs may consider including more teaching hours on online research design or data collection procedures to bring positive discussions on the strengths of such approaches.

Credit author statement

Emmanuel Kwame Opoku: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Project administration. **Li-Hsin Chen:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Review, Editing, Response to reviewers. **Sam Yuan Permadi:** Investigation, Visualization, Project administration.

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