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Factors Influencing Gen-Y Undergraduates' Choice of Research Supervisor: A Case Study of a Malaysian Private University

ALI SHAFIQ and ANBAREEN JAN

Abstract

This paper explored what factors Gen-Y undergraduates deem important, and how they are ranked in selecting a research supervisor. Focus group was used at the first stage to elicit factors that were important to the respondents. The second step included ranking those factors through qualitative survey. The 12 identified factors ranked in descending order of importance are: Educational qualification, experience in the field, previous encounter with the supervisor, previous projects supervised by the supervisor, word-of-mouth related to the supervisor, referral by other faculty members, research methodology used by the supervisor, age, gender, nationality/ethnicity, religion, and profile picture of the supervisor. Being an exploratory study, the data is collected from a small sample from one university only, hence raising generalization issues. For future research, these dimensions can be validated via a large sample study. This research sheds light on what attracts millennials when selecting their research supervisor; from which academics and higher education institutions can identify potential areas of weaknesses and introduce subsequent improvements. The existing literature focusses on postgraduate researchers, after they have chosen a supervisor; whereas this research explores how undergraduates choose a research supervisor. The model formulated in this study could also be applied to postgraduate students as to what attracts them when selecting their supervisor.

Keywords: research supervision, millennials/Gen-Y, services marketing, consumer decision making process, qualitative research.



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Introduction

Education is regarded as a service, which is positioned towards the service end of the product-service continuum (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011) (see Appendix A). The Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption by Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) can thus be applied whenever making a decision regarding education (consumption). This paper focuses on the central process of what happens inside the consumers' "black box" when making a decision. Specifically it is the "pre-purchase search" that sparked the interest for this paper.

Generation Y is a cohort born after Generation X (San, Omar, & Thurasamy, 2015) roughly between 1980-2000 (Kelan, 2017); some put the period between 1978-1994 (San et al., 2015) or even 1980-1994 (Thambiah, Khin, Muthaiyah, & Yen, 2015). They are also referred to the *millennials* (Kelan, 2017), *dot.com generation*, *eco boomers*, and *millionaires* (San et al., 2015). By 2030, this generation will comprise 75% of the total global workforce (Naim & Lenkla, 2016). Thambiah et al. (2015) reported that Gen Y in Malaysia account for 35% of the total population and is thus considered the largest segment (San et al., 2015). It is regarded as a vital consumer segment by the prime minister of Malaysia, *Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak* (Gasper, 2014). Gen Y have high buying power (San et al., 2015), different societal values (Sa'ari & Koe, 2014), as well as different personalities, attitudes, behaviors, and work values (Naim & Lenkla, 2016); and hence should not be ignored in consumer behavior studies Sa'ari and Koe (2014).

Research supervision has now gained central importance in the successful completion of many graduate programs. Ismail, Abiddin, and Hassan (2011) describe supervision as:

A two-way interactional process that requires both the student and the supervisor to consciously engage each other within the spirit of professionalism, respect, collegiality, and open-mindedness. Supervision is a complex social encounter which involves two parties with both converging and diverging interests. (p. 79)

This research identifies the research-supervisor related factors important to the students. Often undergraduate students pursuing a business degree undertake a mini-research to learn research fundamentals while exploring a topic of interest. For that they require a research supervisor to guide them. What factors affect a student's choice of supervisor, especially at the undergraduate level, is mostly an understudied area. Existing research on research supervision revolves around postgraduate students, and that too is limited to the period when the research students have actually initiated their research studies (Al-Naggar, Sarory, Al-Naggar, & Al-Muosli, 2012; Burnett, 1999; Fulton & Turner, 2008; Ismail et al., 2011; Lessing & Schulze, 2002; Malfroy, 2005; Nordentoft, Thomsen, & Wichmann-Hansen, 2013; Svinhufvud & Vehviläinen, 2013; Vilkinas, 2008). This paper focuses on undergraduate research students who are yet to embark on their research journey.

It carries its significance from the fact that universities are emphasizing on quality research students in order to enhance their own image and rankings (Ismail et al., 2011). Information on the perceptions of students offers very important clues as to what they expect (Lessing & Schulze, 2002). It is very pertinent in today's time when students are

becoming more and more aware of their rights, as a result of which they demand more quality (Lessing & Schulze, 2002).

Literature Review

This section discusses the concept of service, the importance of millennials, and existing research on research supervision.

Services

Services are defined by Lovelock and Wirtz as:

Services are economic activities offered one party to another. Often time-based, performances bring about desired results to recipients, objects, or other assets for which purchasers have responsibility.

In exchange for money, time, and effort, service customers expect value from access to goods, labor, professional skills, facilities, networks, and systems; but they do not normally take ownership of any of the physical elements involved. (2011, p. 37)

In this regard, the authors explain that customers/purchasers are looking for solutions or *desired results* to their problems; and often the service providers are seen marketing their services as a solution to the problems being faced. Value is created when the service provider renders her expertise to create the desired results, which does not always end in ownership of anything.

When products and services are compared along the degree of tangibility, Shostack (1977) gave an interesting continuum where pure products are placed at one end and pure services on the other. Consultation and teaching are seen as near the pure services end; this confirms the status of project supervision as a service that academics provide to the students. Finally, using Lovelock's (1983) classification, project supervision is classified under *mental stimulus processing* where *intangible actions* are performed upon *people* (see Appendix B).

Three-stage model of service consumption

"Understanding customer behavior lies at the heart of marketing" (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011, p. 58). In this regard it becomes very important to understand how customers behave before, during, and after their purchase and consumption of the product or service. Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) came up with the Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption for the same purpose consisting of a (1) Pre-purchase Stage, (2) Service Encounter Stage, and (3) Post-encounter Stage. Each stage has several more steps within. Of relevance here is the Pre-purchase Stage where the customer (a) becomes aware of the need, (b) evaluates the alternatives available, and (3) makes a decision (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). Here it seems pertinent to reintroduce the purpose and objective of this paper – to find which factors are important to the students to select their research project supervisor. Some other concepts need to be specified here: Research project is already classified as a "service" where students are the "customers" and the potential supervisors are the "service providers." The customers (students) are already aware of the need, which is to obtain good grades in the research module in order to achieve their undergraduate degree.

The second step is of most relevance here where the customers evaluate the various service providers (research supervisors). In this regard, Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) give certain sources whom the customers consult in order to evaluate the alternatives, such as the customers review the information provided by the supplier herself which includes advertising, brochures, information on websites or other public places. The customers can also review information from third parties in the form of reviews, ratings, comments or complaints, awards, and satisfaction ratings. The customers can also review the service providers after a one-on-one discussion with them. Finally, the evaluation can also take place after seeking advice and feedback from third party advisors, and other customers. Hence, all these factors potentially influence the decision making. This research tries to find which of these sources held most significance to the customers when making the consumption decision.

Previous research on supervisor selection

This section of the literature review centers around the factors identified in the focus group session, i.e., age, educational qualification, gender, nationality (or ethnicity), number of years of experience, other projects supervised, previous encounter with the supervisor, profile picture, referral by other faculty members, religion, research methodology, and word-of-mouth about the supervisor (in alphabetical order) and will be discussed accordingly.

The way a supervisor conducts supervision is important not only for the student, but also for the institution. Supervision has important moral, reputational, as well as financial implications (Al-Naggar et al., 2012). Effective facilitation and responsibility is required for the completion of a student's research (Al-Naggar et al., 2012). Lessing and Schulze (2002) equate a supervisor's role to that of a *guide* which advises and ensures scientific quality while providing emotional support. Grant (1999, p. 2) says that predominantly supervisory practice is viewed as a "fundamentally rational and transparent practice between autonomous individuals." It is also seen as a form of teaching, where teaching is a progressive activity which is always aimed at developing the student to their fullest potential.

Age, gender, and nationality/ethnicity of the supervisor

"Identity counts in supervision" (Grant, 1999, p. 3). Identity, a personal attribute that affects one's beliefs and behaviors of both parties, tends to affect the relationship (Grant, 1999). Since identities are socially defined too, some identities enjoy privileges that others do not. The same identities can be a source of "personal confidence, of resentment, of idealization, of stereotyping, or of dismissiveness" (Grant, 1999, p. 3). The nature of the student-supervisor relationship is potentially influenced by demographic characteristics such as gender and ethnicity (Grant, 1999; Ismail et al., 2011). Kulik and Holbrook (2000) found that service providers' gender and ethnicity affected customers' reactions and acceptability of an unfavorable situation. Similarly, Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor (1997) found gender-stereotypes to affect customers' perception of service quality. Grant (1999) mentions age to be a contributing factor the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Al-Naggar et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative research on international PhD students of a public university in Malaysia to find their satisfaction level with their research studies. They cited many factors

which determine a research student's completion of studies such as "attendance status, level of research funding available, age, completion of an honors degree and discipline areas... suitability of research topic, intellectual environment of the department, and [sic] access to equipment and computers [,] and gender" (Al-Naggar et al., 2012, p. 265).

Number of years of experience/Supervisor's capability

"Successful completion of a dissertation was just as much a function of the abilities of the student as of the supervisor" (Lessing & Schulze, 2002, p. 140). The same notion is seconded by Ismail et al. (2011). Further, "there is no doubt...that the capability of the supervisor is a key factor in the success of candidates" (Vilkinas, 2008, p. 298). Al-Naggar et al. (2012) also cites many research studies which term the supervisor's capabilities as a key factor in a research students' success. Lessing and Schulze (2002) also mention expertise in the research area as one of the main contributions that a supervisor should give; the other two being support for the student and a balance between creativity and critique. Further in their paper they mention some of the causes of student failure, including having a supervisor who does not understand what the research degree requires; in other words, the supervisor is not sufficiently capable. This, in the words of Ismail et al. (2011) is stated as "supervisor's lack of experience." Grant (1999, p. 7) positions a supervisor as an "experienced and successful researcher, an established authority in some area of his/her discipline" which corresponds to the concept of supervisory capability.

Other projects supervised by the research supervisor

If the supervisors are not actively engaged in research, the student will have difficulty in reaching their ultimate goal, write Lessing and Schulze (2002). They must have relevant research knowledge, states Vilkinas (2008).

Previous encounter with the research supervisor

Grant (1999) discusses the widely accepted models of supervision, and while discussing the *negotiated process* model of supervision, highlights the importance of past and current interaction between the supervisor and supervisee.

Referral to the research supervisor by other faculty members

Lessing and Schulze (2002) conclude in their qualitative analysis that students often require referral to other experienced people about certain areas during their studies. On the other hand, Al-Naggar et al. (2012) write that although it is not common to discuss one's supervisory experience among staff, it might actually be beneficial for the quality of research work by the student. This hints towards the factor identified in the current study as "referral by another faculty member."

Religion of the research supervisor

Grant (1999) terms supervision as "ethical work" as it carves the students as

Particular kinds of subjects, academic researchers, with particular sorts of values, beliefs [,] and practices... it is deserving of especial care and attention because it *interferes* with the way people are, how they understand themselves to be, and what they strive to become. (p. 6. emphasis in original)

This can relate to one's adherence to a particular religion.

Word-of-mouth about the research supervisor

Grant (1999) discusses that under the *supervision as an opaque* model "the students' experience of the supervisor's actions, and the stories told by other students of that supervisor's actions, produce a series of overdetermined and affect-laden image texts of the supervisor" (p. 4). She further wrote that supervisors' actions matter to students; while Ismail et al. (2011, p. 79) stated that "A good supervisor-student relationship is the key factor in the success or failure of students' studies or research work", and that a student is often the supervisor's closest colleague. Al-Naggar et al. (2012) term the student-supervisor relationship to be the single most important factor during the research process. Some factors that affect this relationship are research knowledge and related skills, management and interpersonal skills, ability to coordinate research program's activities, mentoring the students, and being supportive of the students (Al-Naggar et al., 2012; Vilkinas, 2008). On the other hand, a poor interpersonal relationship and lack of rapport between the supervisor and the supervisee are the most common reasons for poor research progress students (Al-Naggar et al., 2012; Vilkinas, 2008). Lessing and Schulze (2002, p. 141) and Ismail et al. (2011, p. 80) also seconded this notion when they wrote that "tenacity, support by the supervisor, personal and collegial support and previous experience" all contribute to a students' psychological wellbeing. All these factors lead to positive or negative word-of-mouth.

Methodology

This research follows a qualitative methodology, first because it is exploratory in nature, and second because of the inherent benefits of qualitative methods as against quantitative (Mariampolski, 2001; Shafiq, Haque, Kalthom, & Jan, 2017; Shafiq, Haque, & Omar, 2015). A two stage research was conducted.

Focus Group

The first stage comprised of a focus group, owing to its typical benefits (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2017; Kitzinger, 1995; Rabiee, 2004) where a sample of 15 target students were shown a sample faculty profile (see Appendix C) in a classroom setting. This is a typical faculty profile used at the university, and is also representative of research profiles available typically on websites. The students were all in their 3rd Year (Semester 5) and had already completed their research project. Hence they belonged to the same age group as those who were actually taking the research project. The gender division was 50-50, which is very typical of a Malaysian higher education setting. Moreover, all the participants were at the same level of education, e.g. studying for a Bachelor's degree in International Business and Marketing (Kitzinger, 1995; Rabiee, 2004). They were asked to identify all visible and non-visible elements that could potentially influence a student's decision as to which supervisor to select. It was an open-discussion with the potential of one student's response influencing another (Bernard et al., 2017; Kitzinger, 1995; Lunn & Smith, 2010). Each response was written on the whiteboard for everyone to see. Identical responses were omitted, while similar ones were written together. None of the responses, irrespective of how insignificant it was deemed, was ignored and was incorporated into the list.

In total, 12 elements or factors were identified. These elements are shown in Table 1 in alphabetical order:

Table 1. Factors emerging from the Focus Group study

	Factors
1	Age of the research supervisor
2	Educational qualification of the research supervisor
3	Gender of the research supervisor
4	Nationality (or ethnicity) of the research supervisor
5	Number of years of experience of the research supervisor
6	Other projects supervised or under supervision by the research supervisor
7	Previous encounter with the research supervisor (favorable/unfavorable)
8	Profile picture of the research supervisor (attractive/unattractive)
9	Referral to the research supervisor (by another faculty member)
10	Religion of the research supervisor
11	Research methodology used by the research supervisor
12	Word-of-mouth spread about the research supervisor

It is obvious that some of the factors (2, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 11) are visible on the sample profile provided (see Appendix C); some (1, 4, and 10) could be guessed/assumed by looking at the visible factors; while others (7, 9, and 12) are not visible at all. This final list was also shared with the participants and their consent was granted.

However, when this list was presented in the form of a questionnaire to another audience, the list was reassembled under three dimensions based on the similar nature of the factors. These dimensions and their factors are shown in Figure 1:

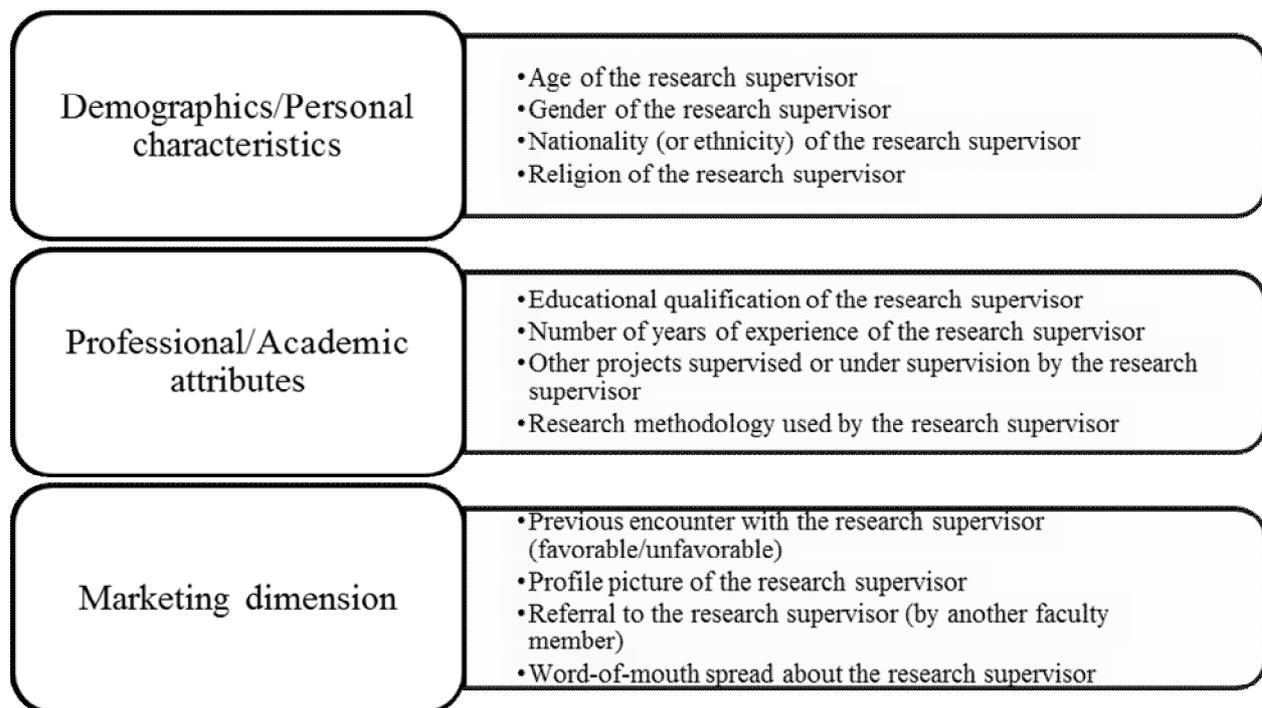


Figure 1. Factors grouped under 3 dimensions

Note that the list presented in Figure 1 although includes all factors from Table 1, yet they are categorized differently. The categorization in Figure 1 makes sense too, since similar natured factors are placed under one common dimension.

Students' Survey

The second stage of the research comprised of asking a broader population which of these factors identified in Table 1 are most important to them when selecting their research supervisors. This population was comprised of 143 students who were actually conducting their research project. The institution's administration distributed the faculty profiles to the students registered for the project from which they were to select their research supervisors. The main objective of this research was to see which are the most important factors that influence a student's decision? For this, they were contacted through email and asked to rank the factors in order of importance via an online form (see Appendix D).

Questionnaire

The online form was divided into five sections. It started with a filter question which let only those students continue forward who had actually seen the faculty profiles and then decided upon whom to choose. Afterwards, the first section asked the students to rank the factors corresponding to their respective dimension. For example, they were asked to rank age, gender, nationality (ethnicity), and religion in terms of importance under the dimension "demographics." One factor could only be ranked once, without the option of double ranking. This practice was applied similarly for the other two dimensions.

The next section asked the students to rank all 12 factors together with respect to each other, independent of the dimension to which they originally belonged. These factors were

mentioned alphabetically to avoid any bias. Similar to the previous section, the students were forced to rank each factor only once; so without double ranking.

The next section sought the respondents' academic particulars (their course of study, semester of study, and their current CGPA), while the final section asked for some demographic information (gender, age, nationality, race, and religion).

Analysis

The data obtained through the questionnaire was put into SPSS version 22. The data obtained was non-parametric in nature for being ranked (Pallant, 2007), and thus "mode" was used to find which element ranked the highest.

Results and Discussions

94 students responded to the circulated form, equating to a response rate of 65.7%. Out of those who responded, 20 had not looked at the faculty profile before selecting the research supervisors, hence they did not continue with the remaining form and exited the survey at that point. Therefore, the total usable responses numbered 74, or 78.7% as the rate of response (see Table 2). Out of the 74, there were 34 females and 40 males, mostly aged between 20-23 years (97.3%), the majority were Malaysians (78.4%), while in terms of religion 40.5% were Buddhists, 27% were Muslims, and 13.5% were Christians.

In terms of academic particulars, a significant majority (62.2%) belonged to the Bachelor's degree programme for Business, specializing in International Business and Marketing; with 86.5% studying in their 4th semester. Finally, the majority of the respondents had a CGPA between 3.51 and 4.00.

Table 2. Demographics/Personal Information of the respondents

	Categories	No. of respondents	%
Faculty profile seen	Yes	74	78.7
	No	20	21.3
Gender	Males	40	54.1
	Females	34	45.9
Age	20	10	13.5
	21	39	52.7
	22	17	22.9
	23	6	8.1
	26	1	1.4
	27	1	1.4
Nationality	Malaysian	58	78.4
	Others (Indonesian, Maldivian, Myanmar, Pakistani, Seychellois, Singaporean)	16	21.6
Religion	Buddhist	30	40.5
	Muslim	20	27.0
	Christian	10	13.5

	Categories	No. of respondents	%
	Chinese	4	5.4
	No religion	4	5.4
	Hindu	2	2.7
	Not stated	4	5.4
Study Program	International Business & Marketing (IBM)	46	62.2
	Business Administration (BA)	6	8.1
	Finance and Economics (F&E)	6	8.1
	Accounting and Finance (A&F)	6	8.1
	Human Resource Management (HRM)	4	5.4
	Marketing (BM)	4	5.4
	International Business (IB)	2	2.7
Study semester	Semester 4	64	86.5
	Semester 5	8	10.8
	Semester 3	2	2.7
CGPA	0.00-2.19	2	2.7
	2.20-2.50	14	18.9
	2.51-3.00	14	18.9
	3.01-3.50	16	21.6
	3.51-4.00	18	24.3
	Not stated	10	13.5

Table 3 addresses the main objective of this research study. It shows how many and by what percentage students think a factor is important in the selection of their research supervisor. Since the list is ranked, therefore, arithmetic mean carries less weight than the mode (Pallant, 2007).

Demographics/personal characteristics

There was no clear “most important” factor under this dimension, although there was a significant number that selected all the factors as being the most important when making a decision. In terms of the majority of votes, “age of the supervisor” and “nationality (ethnicity)” were clearly ranked the 2nd most important factors. “Gender of the supervisor” occupied a clear 3rd place, while “religion of the supervisor” was the least important factor when choosing a supervisor. When compared, one is made to believe that “nationality (ethnicity)” was considered more important than the “age” in terms of number of responses, as the percentage for “nationality (ethnicity)” is higher than that of “age.”

Professional/academic attributes

These attributes were ranked very clearly when compared to the aforementioned. “Other projects supervised by the supervisor” was a common first element to view when selecting a supervisor. The “educational qualification” ranked 2nd in terms of importance. The respondents found “experience of the supervisor” equally important as an equal number ranked it at 1st and 3rd. Hence it shows, on the one hand that students are indifferent about it; while on the other it also shows the sheer importance of this factor alone. This importance is further bolstered by the finding that a close percentage also

ranked this factor at number 2. “Research Methodology” is ranked at number 4 by numbers. The majority do not see it at any of the first three places – though a close majority does consider it to be in 3rd place.

Marketing dimension

This dimension was ranked unambiguously. The students clearly knew the most from the least important factors. Hence, it can obviously be seen that “previous encounter with the research supervisor” is clearly the most important factor in this dimension. This is followed by “word-of-mouth about the supervisor” at number 2, “referral by another faculty member” at number 3, and “profile picture of the supervisor” clearly at number 4.

Table 3. Factor ranking within individual dimensions

<i>Demographics/personal characteristics</i>						
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	Total
Age of the research supervisor	#	20	22	16	16	74
	%	27	29.7	21.6	21.6	100
Nationality (or ethnicity) of the research supervisor	#	16	36	16	6	74
	%	21.6	48.6	21.6	8.1	100
Gender of the research supervisor	#	22	8	30	14	74
	%	29.7	10.8	40.5	18.9	100
Religion of the research supervisor	#	16	8	12	38	74
	%	21.6	10.8	16.2	51.4	100
<i>Professional/Academic attributes</i>						
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	Total
Other projects supervised or under supervision by the research supervisor	#	30	14	10	20	74
	%	40.5	18.9	13.5	27	100
Educational qualification of the research supervisor	#	12	28	14	20	74
	%	16.2	37.8	18.9	27	100
Number of years of experience of the research supervisor	#	24	20	24	6	74
	%	32.4	27	32.4	8.1	100
Research methodology used by the research supervisor	#	8	12	26	28	74
	%	10.8	16.2	35.1	37.8	100
<i>Marketing dimension</i>						
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	Total
Previous encounter with the research supervisor (favorable/unfavorable)	#	30	18	16	10	74
	%	40.5	24.3	21.6	13.5	100
Word-of-mouth spread about the research supervisor	#	16	32	14	12	74
	%	21.6	43.2	18.9	16.2	100
Referral to the research supervisor (by another faculty member)	#	10	20	40	4	74
	%	13.5	27	54.1	5.4	100
Profile picture of the research supervisor	#	18	4	4	48	74
	%	24.3	5.4	5.4	64.9	100

The second part of the questionnaire asked the respondents to rank all 12 factors with respect to each other. This was a complex task on its own which required streamlined execution of the online survey. Google Forms was used, and set up as such that the

respondents could choose only one item per row and per column so that they could not give two or more ranks to the same factors, nor could they give the same rank to more than one factor. This ensured zero overlap across the rows and down the columns.

Table 4. Combined ranking of individual factors

<i>Individual factor rankings</i>													
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th	12 th
Previous Encounter	#	18	4	4	8	6	14	12	2	4	2	0	0
	%	24.3	5.4	5.4	10.8	8.1	18.9	16.2	2.7	5.4	2.7	0.0	0.0
Education	#	16	16	6	2	12	2	4	4	4	0	4	4
	%	21.6	21.6	8.1	2.7	16.2	2.7	5.4	5.4	5.4	0.0	5.4	5.4
Projects	#	6	14	12	4	0	10	8	8	2	4	4	2
	%	8.1	18.9	16.2	5.4	0.0	13.5	10.8	10.8	2.7	5.4	5.4	2.7
Experience	#	8	12	12	10	12	4	8	2	2	0	4	0
	%	10.8	16.2	16.2	13.5	16.2	5.4	10.8	2.7	2.7	0.0	5.4	0.0
Referral	#	0	0	10	10	12	8	6	10	8	6	2	2
	%	0.0	0.0	13.5	13.5	16.2	10.8	8.1	13.5	10.8	8.1	2.7	2.7
Word of Mouth	#	8	4	6	6	14	10	6	0	0	4	6	10
	%	10.8	5.4	8.1	8.1	18.9	13.5	8.1	0.0	0.0	5.4	8.1	13.5
Research Methodology	#	4	8	6	4	2	10	12	8	4	2	10	4
	%	5.4	10.8	8.1	5.4	2.7	13.5	16.2	10.8	5.4	2.7	13.5	5.4
Profile Picture	#	4	0	2	4	4	4	4	8	14	4	14	12
	%	5.4	0.0	2.7	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.4	10.8	18.9	5.4	18.9	16.2
Age	#	4	10	0	6	4	6	2	10	10	12	4	6
	%	5.4	13.5	0.0	8.1	5.4	8.1	2.7	13.5	13.5	16.2	5.4	8.1
Gender	#	0	2	6	8	6	2	2	2	12	16	14	4
	%	0.0	2.7	8.1	10.8	8.1	2.7	2.7	2.7	16.2	21.6	18.9	5.4
Nationality	#	2	0	6	8	2	2	4	12	10	14	6	8
	%	2.7	0.0	8.1	10.8	2.7	2.7	5.4	16.2	13.5	18.9	8.1	10.8
Religion	#	4	4	4	4	0	2	6	8	4	10	6	22
	%	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.4	0.0	2.7	8.1	10.8	5.4	13.5	8.1	29.7

Table 4 shows how the respondents ranked all the 12 factors together. “Previous encounter” was ranked top, with “education of the supervisor” a very close 2nd. “Experience of the supervisor” was ranked at 2nd, 3rd, and 5th simultaneously with equal numbers of students. When seen through vertical columns, it still retains the highest votes at 3rd position. The highest votes for 5th place were obtained by “experience,” “referral,” and “word-of-mouth”; however, “word-of-mouth” obtained the most votes amongst the three. “Research Methodology used by the supervisor” took 7th place by number of votes. “Profile picture” was positioned at 9th and 11th simultaneously, while “age,” “gender,” and “nationality” tied at 10th position. Yet, the majority considered that “gender” should be at number 10. Finally, “religion of the supervisor” was unanimously placed 12th – the least important of all factors. There was no clear 4th, 6th, or 8th position for any factor across the rows or even down the columns.

Conclusion

What it clearly shows is that demographics of the supervisor do not rank anywhere close to the main priorities for the students. They clearly ranked at 10th and 12th, showing how much less important they are considered by the respondents. This goes against the literature cited earlier, where gender, ethnicity, and age were all deemed important for successful supervision (Al-Naggar et al., 2012; Grant, 1999; Ismail et al., 2011). Even a marketing attribute –the profile picture– is ranked very low (9th and 11th) as it also somewhat related to one’s personal characteristics.

What is deemed important are the professional/academic attributes and the marketing dimension. For example, “previous encounter with the supervisor” (a marketing factor) is considered the most important factor to consider. The professional/academic attributes occupy 2nd, 3rd, and 4th places (educational qualification, other projects supervised, and number of years of experience of the supervisor). There is evidence of these attributes in the literature as well (Al-Naggar et al., 2012; Grant, 1999; Ismail et al., 2011; Lessing & Schulze, 2002; Vilkinas, 2008).

Hence, the supervisors need to pay close attention to their inter-relationship. This is a two-pronged idea where these relationships have to be maintained with the potential supervisees as well as with one’s colleagues/peers. Both were ranked quite high by the students. Though word-of-mouth ranked 5th, it holds significance as the generation under discussion trusts word-of-mouth more than any other indirect source (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010).

This research was applied with only a small number of students at one particular university in Malaysia. This will have limited the variety of respondents which might give different responses during a qualitative study from these students. In order to generalize these findings, a largescale study needs to be conducted. Hence, this is a potential area of further study. Perhaps the dimensions and the underlying factors can be validated through a largescale quantitative study comprised of many students from different universities. The same will help to uncover any other dimension which might not have emerged here.

Notes

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