



Professionalism: A contemporary interpretation in hospitality industry context



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ABSTRACT

Professionalism is traditionally associated with classic professions such as medicine and law. With the growth of consumerism, numerous industries and occupations are striving for professionalism to enhance their status. This study addresses the conceptual ambiguity of professionalism by identifying the elements or criteria to achieve it in the hospitality industry. The perceptions of hotel practitioners from various work levels including junior staff, middle managers, and senior executives are explored through focus group interviews. Findings identify eight elements of professionalism, namely, passion, sensitivity, and open-mindedness to new trends, team-oriented attitude, competence and skills, emotional self-control, professional ethics, leadership by example, and perfectionism.

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1. Introduction

“Professionalism” is a term traditionally associated with classic professions, such as medicine, law, engineering, and the sciences. However, with the development of the postindustrial or information society and the growth of consumerism, numerous industries or occupations, such as public service, education, and professional services, are striving to attain professionalism to enhance their status (Rawel, 2003) and meet the needs of knowledgeable consumers. In the contemporary era, nearly everyone wishes to become a professional. Financial planners, information technology workers, journalists, designers, and even babysitters portray and organize themselves as professionals (Noordegraaf, 2007). A wide variety of occupations are now striving to achieve professionalism.

Several researchers highlight the growing importance of professionalism in the hospitality and tourism industries (Baum, 1989; Paraskevas, 2001; Torres and Kline, 2013). Considering its dynamic environment, service orientation, and high labor intensity, the hospitality industry has required its members to embrace the highest level of professionalism (Baum, 1989; Sheldon, 1989; Wong and Chan, 2010) and develop hotel management into a profession (Burgess, 2011). Christou (1999) also argues that the industry necessitates ever-increasing levels of professionalism. Paraskevas

(2001) and Chen et al. (2005) reveal that professionalism of the labor force of the hospitality industry is a prerequisite for success. Mak et al. (2011) also endorse professionalism as the key to achieve long-term viability and competitiveness in the industry. The need to develop professionalism is supported by studies on Irish tourism (Tourism Policy Review Group, 2003) and Chinese hotel industry (Wong and Chan, 2010). Hence, Pizam (2007) urges hospitality management schools to provide professional education.

In the hospitality industry, facilities and physical design are regarded as the hardware of hotels, which may be easily duplicated by competitors. By contrast, the software, that is, the quality of the staff, cannot be effortlessly copied. Reliance on human capital has constantly been more significant in hospitality industry than in any other industry, even in an era of impressive technological advances. Although technological developments do allow for a slightly higher degree of sophistication in providing services, the hospitality industry is not as technologically astute as others are (Pizam and Shani, 2009). Considering that hospitality industry is a type of service industry that is labor intensive, performance of hotels is strongly dependent on employees (Masry et al., 2004). Customer service in the future will require an increasing degree of professionalism from both managers and front-line staff (Armistead and Kiely, 2003). In an attempt to improve service quality, numerous organizations are enhancing their employees' professionalism through a wide range of training activities (Baum, 1989).

Despite such recognition of the increasing importance of professionalism in the global hospitality and tourism industry, a review of the literature in this field indicates that only a limited number

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of studies on this concept have been conducted thus far (Baum and Reid, 1986; Sheldon, 1989; Ap and Wong, 2001; Coughlan, 2001; Burgess, 2011; Hussey et al., 2010; Mak et al., 2011). Hussey et al. (2010) criticize the insufficient knowledge on professionalism in tourism and confusion in the usage and meaning of the term. Perceptions of professionalism among practitioners (Baum and Reid, 1986) and researchers vary (see Slattery, 2002 for example). Accordingly, the topic must be examined by hospitality and tourism researchers.

Scanning the scarce literature on professionalism in hospitality and tourism, a few studies that have investigated the concept and its components emerge (see Sheldon, 1989; Ap and Wong, 2001; Coughlan, 2001; Burgess, 2011; Hussey et al., 2010 for examples). Several deficiencies can be observed in these studies. First, although Sheldon (1989) was the first to examine the dimensions of professionalism in the hospitality industry, her study focuses on the industry level rather than on individuals. She suggests 12 criteria to define an industry as professional. A number of these criteria, such as the establishment of associations and organizations, licensure, complexity, self-employment, and high income, may not be applicable to individuals' professionalism.

Second, Coughlan (2001) focuses on acts relating to professionalism or its ethical codes, including justice, integrity, competence, and utility, ignoring other significant aspects such as attitude. Pizam (2007) argues that hospitality workers should demonstrate appropriate attitudes. Lee (2014) proposes attitudinal dimensions of professionalism such as the pursuit of knowledge, self-management, a sense of calling, and a customer orientation. Thus, the importance of an attitudinal component in professionalism is supported by certain researchers.

Third, Burgess (2011) focuses on select job roles in hospitality, such as financial controllers, whose work is commonly regarded as identical to the classic accountancy profession. However, the work of financial controllers in hotels is completely different from other roles, which are mainly operational. This reality reduces the generalizability of the study results across the broad spectrum of roles in the hospitality profession. Similarly, Ap and Wong (2001) focus on tour guides. The limited scope of these studies suggests a need for further exploration of professionalism across a broad spectrum of hotel employees.

2. Objectives

Reflecting on these gaps, the present study is designed to identify the dimensions of professionalism for individual hotel employees rather than the hospitality industry as a whole. As opposed to the aforementioned literature, which focuses on the personal traits of professional hospitality employees, this study seeks to explore the dimensions of professionalism. The aim is to understand the personal, attitudinal, and behavioral orientations required from individual employees and the capabilities they must develop to become professional members of the hospitality industry. Extending the work of Lee (2014), this study defines professionalism as a set of individual values, a behavioral orientation, a belief system, an attitudinal inclination, and an array of capabilities that advances both personal expertise and the social status of an individual's occupation.

Furthermore, this study discovers practitioners' own perceptions of professionalism. To ensure that different points of view are gathered, hotel practitioners from various levels were invited to participate for two reasons. First, professionalism has long been emphasized in a leadership/management context. Numerous studies describe the concept as a core trait for managers/leaders in the hospitality industry (see Burgess, 2007; Wong and Chan, 2010 for examples). Thus, the viewpoints of managers and senior

executives are noteworthy. However, the importance of professionalism among junior and non-managerial staff has been generally overlooked although an increasing amount of research on tourism education advocates its importance. Fournier (1999) contends that professionalism is not limited to management; more entry-level roles, such as restaurant and security, may also be professionalized. Therefore, the present study also incorporates the views of junior staff below supervisory level. Second, various studies have reported that managers and subordinates, as well as members of different generations, have different perceptions of professionalism (Chen and Choi, 2008; Park and Gursoy, 2012). Thus, the present study aims to consolidate these various viewpoints from different levels of practitioners, including junior staff, middle managers, and senior executives.

3. Literature review

3.1. Concept of professionalism

The idea of professionalism originates predominantly from studies in the field of sociology in the 1930s (Hussey et al., 2010). These early studies emphasized professional values, identity, and behavior within a social system (Noordegraaf, 2007). Over the past 80 years, professionalism has significantly evolved and developed. Studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s centered on the description of the regulation of professional groups and the traits of their members (Freidson, 2001). In the 1970s, researchers shifted their focus to the process of professionalization by measuring the progress of occupational groups toward becoming full professions through specific competencies or traits (Swales, 2003). Lately, the focus has been on the normative value of professionalism as a multi-dimensional concept (Hussey et al., 2010; Lee, 2014). Nevertheless, the interpretation of professionalism has yet to reach a consensus (Sheldon, 1989; Hussey et al., 2010; Lee, 2014).

The term "professionalism" is widely interchangeable with "profession" and "professional." Early literature commonly uses the term professionalism to describe professional persons, such as lawyers and doctors (Nelson and Rutherford, 2009), whereas the ideas of profession and professional are viewed as identical (Lindop, 1982). In response to the transformation of society and the increasing sophistication of consumers, professionalism has been extended to numerous other types of occupations, resulting to diverged definitions of these terms. Helsby (1996) provides a clarified distinction between "being a professional" and "behaving professionally." The former may confer status, reward, and public recognition, whereas the latter only implies dedication, codes of behavior, and a strong service ethic.

Christou (1999) defines professionalism as a fine balance between providing efficient service and maintaining good financial results. Based on previous studies, Pizam (2007) defines it as an amalgamation of an array of appearance and behaviors, an assortment of technical and conceptual skills, a commitment to maintain competence in a given body of knowledge, and a set of internalized character strengths, values, and attitudes directed toward high-quality service to others, concern for others, respect for the rule of law, and commitment to excellence. Lee (2014) defines professionalism as a set of individual values, a behavioral orientation, and a belief system that advances both personal expertise and the social status of an individual's occupation.

Professionalism is often related to technical skills (Paraskevas, 2001). Hall (1968) suggests that it has both structural and attitudinal aspects. The former denotes those characteristics that are part of the occupation, including such criteria as full-time work, establishment of a training school, formation of a professional association, and development of a code of ethics. The latter includes belief in

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