



# Attitudinal dimensions of professionalism and service quality efficacy of frontline employees in hotels



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## ABSTRACT

The professionalism of a workforce is critical for the development of the tourism and hospitality industry. This study addresses the issues of conceptual confusions in professionalism constructs and distinguishes the attitudinal dimensions of professionalism at the individual level from the structural aspects at the occupational level. This paper focuses on knowledge pursuance, self-management, sense of calling, and customer orientation as significant factors in the professional attitude of service providers and analyzes their impact on the service provider's service quality (SQ) efficacy. A survey analysis of frontline employees at hotels in Seoul, Korea, suggests that knowledge pursuance has a positive impact on the interactive SQ efficacy, while self-management orientation is positively related with functional SQ efficacy. More significantly, it shows that a sense of calling and customer orientation are essential professional attitudes, having a positive and significant impact on both functional and interactive SQ efficacy.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of qualified and skilled personnel is an essential condition for any industry's growth and prosperity (Sheldon, 1989; Hussey et al., 2011). Because of the problems arising from heavy workloads and low job satisfaction, and the resulting high rate of staff turnover, the global tourism and hospitality industry has suffered from the difficulty of attracting and retaining a high-quality workforce (Hussey et al., 2011; Ko, 2012). As both the high competence and expertise of service providers are the core of the tourism industry's success, increasing academic attention is being paid to the impact of professionalism on the tourism and hospitality industry (Sheldon, 1989; Coughlan, 2001; Ap and Wong, 2001; Mak et al., 2011; Burgess, 2011; Hussey et al., 2011; Ko, 2012).

The long, in-depth study of professionalism in sociology has focused on the organizing principles of professions such as law, clergy, medicine, architecture, and science. Sociological studies have analyzed the characteristic principles of professions, as well as how these characteristics endowed privilege and high status to those professions compared to other occupations (Wilensky, 1964; Vollmer and Mills, 1966; Crompton, 1990; Coughlan, 2001). Although the study of professionalism has expanded, it has been pointed out that the concept of professionalism has multiple

interpretations which are inconsistent in use and meaning (Fournier, 1999; Hussey et al., 2011; Evetts, 2003a, 2011). The definition of professionalism continues to broaden as more occupations strive to achieve professional status and as professionalism becomes defined more by organization than by occupation (Evetts, 2011). The resulting ambiguity hinders the development of professionalism as a construct for empirical research and the assessment of its influence on individual and organizational outcomes.

Addressing this issue, a group of sociological studies proposed a reconceptualization of professionalism at two levels of analysis: the structural dimension at the occupation level and the attitudinal dimension at the individual level (Evetts, 2003a, 2011; Parkan, 2008; Boyt et al., 2001; Hammer, 2000). A long tradition of structural professionalism, strongly entrenched in sociology, has analyzed the process and conditions of professionalization, focusing on a set of organizing principles that raises "occupation" to a level of high status and privilege in society. A list of characteristic organizing principles includes the systemic body of knowledge, professional associations, autonomy, and code of ethics (Fig. 1). In contrast, the attitudinal dimension turns attention to the individual level and understands professionalism as the characteristic values and belief system that individual members conceive associated with their occupations (Evetts, 2003a, 2011; Parkan, 2008; Hammer, 2000; Boyt et al., 2001). In this dimension, professionalism refers to a set of individual values, a behavior orientation, and a belief system which advances the personal expertise and social status of individuals' occupations.

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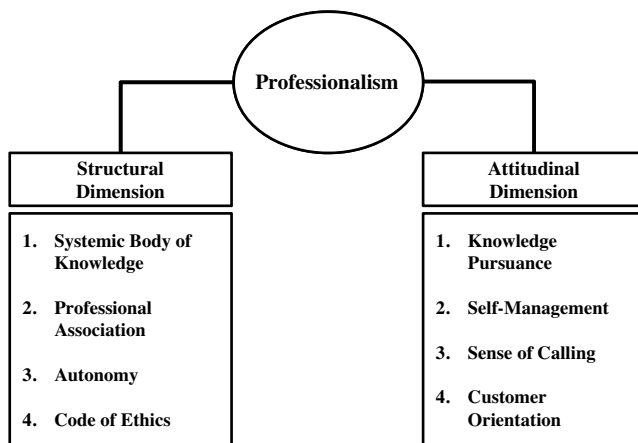


Fig. 1. Structural and attitudinal dimension of professionalism.

Professionalism studies in the tourism and hospitality industry are not free from issues of ambiguity and theoretical inconsistency (Hussey et al., 2011). Few studies have made an attempt to address the problems of conceptual inconsistency, with the majority of studies focusing on structural professionalism (Coughlan, 2001; Ap and Wong, 2001; Mak et al., 2011; Burgess, 2011). To address the limitations in existing research, this paper adopts an attitudinal approach toward professionalism by re-conceptualizing the core values, behavior orientations, and belief systems of professional service providers working in hotels. The study focuses on the following core attitudinal dimensions of professionalism in hotels: (1) knowledge pursuance, (2) self-management, (3) a sense of calling, and (4) customer orientation (Fig. 1). To evaluate the influence of these professional attitudes on organizational outcomes, this study analyzes the impact of the professional attitudes on front-line employees' self-perception of their service capability, or the service quality (SQ) self-efficacy.

Based on a survey of 357 frontline employees employed in super-deluxe hotels in Seoul, Korea, the research results show that the knowledge pursuance of professional employees has a positive impact only on interactive SQ efficacy, while self-management orientation is positively associated only with the functional SQ efficacy. Furthermore, the empirical study shows that a sense of calling and customer orientation can have a positive and significant impact on both the functional and interactive SQ efficacy of frontline employees.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 presents a review of professionalism to address key definitions, a theoretical discussion to emphasize the significance of distinguishing the attitudinal dimensions of professionalism from the structural aspects, and hypotheses that predict the impact of knowledge pursuance, self-management, a sense of calling, and customer orientation on the SQ efficacy of service providers. Section 3 introduces the research methodology, and Section 4 presents the data analysis and the results of the hypotheses testing. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the study and discusses its contributions and limitations.

## 2. Theory and hypothesis

### 2.1. Review of professionalism

Being understood as particular kinds of service sector occupations, *professions* are powerful occupations that have privileged social status (Evetts, 2003a). There has long been a consensus among sociologists that professions utilize different approaches when organizing work, workers, and relations when compared

with other general occupations (Evetts, 2011). As a knowledge-based category of occupation, professions demand a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experiences (Evetts, 2003b). In addition, professions take a distinctive form of decentralized control and regulation of occupation, constituting a critical component of society (Evetts, 2003a).

In a long effort to theorize the operational characteristics of professions, sociologists have conceptualized *professionalism* as a special means of organizing work and controlling workers in professions (Evetts, 2011). Because of social significance and influence, sociologists of professional occupations have long tried to identify the common characteristics that distinguish professions from other categories of occupations. They have conceptualized a set of common principles that have enabled professional workers to achieve high social status and exclusive power (Wilensky, 1964; Vollmer and Mills, 1966; Crompton, 1990; Boyt et al., 2001; Coughlan, 2001; Parkan, 2008; Evetts, 2003a, 2011) (Fig. 1). Despite this long tradition, however, the meaning of professionalism has become increasingly unclear, as a large number of occupations have professionalized (Wilensky, 1964; Vollmer and Mills, 1966). The sociological literature has embraced contrasting (even contradictory) interpretations of professionalism (Hussey et al., 2011; Evetts, 2003a; Boyt et al., 2001; Hammer, 2000), which has caused increasing concern that the concept of professionalism might lose its theoretical appeal in social explanations. Addressing the inconsistency issue in the theoretical concept, a notable effort was made to re-conceptualize professionalism, by differentiating professional attitudes at the individual level from structural aspects of professionalism at the occupation level (Parkan, 2008; Evetts, 2003a, 2011; Boyt et al., 2001; Hammer, 2000).

As shown in Fig. 1, the structural professionalism of traditional sociological studies is concerned with the organizing principles of professions and focuses on the institutional conditions that lead to the professionalization of an occupation (Wilensky, 1964; Vollmer and Mills, 1966; Crompton, 1990; Coughlan, 2001). The list of the essential organizing principles governing professions includes: (1) a systemic body of knowledge, (2) professional associations, (3) professional autonomy, and (4) a code of ethics.

First, one of the most notable characteristics of professionalism is that professional practice is founded on a systemic body of knowledge and expertise, which is acquired only through a rigorous education and training process (Wilensky, 1964; Crompton, 1990). The licensing rules are the core part of both maintaining a basic standard of professional training and education and erecting barriers to entry (Crompton, 1990). Second, entrenched and well-organized professional associations are a common characteristic of strongly institutionalized professions (Boyt et al., 2001; Coughlan, 2001; Parkan, 2008). Professional associations play a central role in reinforcing the values, beliefs, and identity of a profession. Third, professionals have established strong norms for individual autonomy and discretionary decision-making, based on the belief that laypersons are not qualified to evaluate the quality of professional work, which needs to be judged instead by their colleagues (Boyt et al., 2001; Evetts, 2003a; Parkan, 2008). Fourth, and finally, professions are distinguished by their members' commitment to ethical codes and the socially responsible use of their knowledge (Crompton, 1990; Coughlan, 2001; Parkan, 2008). Codes of ethics, usually instituted by professional associations, prescribe the appropriate behaviors that professional members should observe in all of their work activities.

However, it is notable that the discourse of professionalism not only operates at the macro level of professional occupations, but also works as a control mechanism of individuals at the micro level, as it formulates individual attitudes and behaviors (Evetts, 2003a). The theoretical attempt to differentiate attitudinal dimensions is a relatively recent effort and it has tried to understand

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