

# **An Exploratory Study on the Antecedents of Occupational Commitment among Hospitality Educators in Hong Kong**

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## *Abstract*

In recent years, the growth in hospitality management programmes and the demand for hospitality educators in Hong Kong has increased dramatically. The hospitality industry, educational institutions and hospitality students also have high expectations of hospitality educators. Due to an increased need to recruit and retain qualified hospitality educators, this research seeks to understand the occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong.

Occupational commitment is an important indicator of a number of factors. It is found that occupational commitment is closely related to work-related stress, job satisfaction and occupational retention (Jamal, 1990; Borg et al., 1991; Jepson and Forrest, 2006; Klassen and Chiu, 2010). However, there is lack of research investigating the occupational commitment or its antecedents of hospitality educators. Therefore the study aims to gain an insight into the occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong.

This research identifies the key antecedents affecting occupational commitment and investigates which of these antecedents influence the occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong. It also explores the reasons why hospitality educators are committed to hospitality education profession in Hong Kong.

The research presented in this paper is one element of wider study. For this part, a qualitative research method and purposive sampling is adopted. Four focus groups comprised of twenty hospitality educators currently working in Hong Kong have been conducted. The results found that the flexibility of hospitality education work, non-shift work pattern, the self-

actualization needs in education, career opportunities and occupational image are the key antecedents of occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the demand for hospitality management programmes in Hong Kong has increased dramatically. Because of the increase in the reputation of hospitality programmes the number of students from overseas enrolling in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Hong Kong has been growing continuously in recently years (Hsu, 2012). With the increase number of hospitality management programmes developed in Hong Kong and predictions of further growth, the demand for quality hospitality educators is increasing. Hospitality educators play an important role in providing quality hospitality education to students. The educators are always expected to prepare the hospitality students for careers in international hospitality business by understanding multi-ethnic and multi-national student mentality (Jayawardena, 2001). Furthermore, the hospitality educators are expected to train talented graduates with technical and human skills such as working attitudes to meet the industry needs (Chan, 2011). Hospitality educators have to be not only teachers, but also mentors as well as industrial partners in order to train and develop high quality graduates and act as influencers on the students' career choices.

In parallel with teaching, research is another main duty for academics in the hospitality education sector (McKercher et al., 2006). The publication of research articles is very important for hospitality academics in universities (Ladkin and Weber, 2009). It is believed that the publication of research articles is one of the effective career strategies to get a better career in hospitality education industry (Weber and Ladkin, 2008).

In addition to the skills and professional knowledge required, the occupational commitment of hospitality educators is also very important to enhance the quality of students education and better student achievement (Dannetta, 2002). In the education literature, the importance of the occupational commitment of educators has been highlighted. It is found that occupational commitment is closely related to work-related stress, achievement striving, job satisfaction, occupational retention (Jamal, 1990; Borg et al., 1991; Jepson and Forrest, 2006; Klassen and Chiu, 2010). However, the occupational commitment of hospitality educators is always overlooked by scholars as well as hospitality institutions. This combined with a lack of research on understanding the careers of hospitality and tourism educators identified in previous research (Weber and Ladkin, 2008) provides the rationale for this current research.

## **The Study**

The research presented in this paper forms the first stage of a comprehensive study of hospitality educators in Hong Kong. The aim is to investigate occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong by identifying the antecedents that influence occupational commitment and the factors affecting the choice of hospitality education as a profession in Hong Kong.

The objectives of the research are

1. To understand the reasons for entering the hospitality education profession
2. To ascertain the key antecedents of occupational commitment among Hong Kong hospitality educators

The research has been informed in the initial stages by occupational commitment literature, which is outlined below.

## Occupational Commitment

Occupational commitment is also called profession commitment or career commitment in the commitment literature. Occupational commitment refers to “a person's belief in and acceptance of the values of his or her chosen occupation or line of work and a willingness to maintain membership in that occupation” (Meyer, et al., 1993; Vandenberg & Scarpello, 1994, p. 535). Lee, et al. (2000) further defines occupational commitment as “a psychological link between a person and his or her occupation that is based on an affective reaction to that occupation”. Similar to organizational commitment, occupational commitment is suggested to be composed of three components which are affective, continuance and normative facets (Meyer et al., 1993 p.800). Affective occupational commitment refers to the degree of an employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement with a particular career role (Mowday, et al., 1979; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer, et al., 1993). Continuance occupational commitment refers to the degree of an employee’s attachment to the occupation due to the perceived costs of leaving and based on his or her non-transferable investment such as professional expertise or high occupational status (Meyer, et al., 1993; Hall, et al., 2005). Normative occupational commitment refers to the degree of an employees’ sense of moral obligation to the occupation (Meyer, et al., 1993) and it can be generated by the external pressure from colleagues, friends or the family(Hall et al., 2005).

The impacts of occupational commitment have been widely studied by scholars (Blau, 2003; Chang, et al., 2007; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Lee, et al., 2000;). Occupational commitment is recognized as a significant predictor of turnover intention (Schmidt and Lee, 2008) because it relates to a person’s feeling on an occupation as a lifelong career choice

(Gardner, 1992). It is believed that a person with stronger occupational commitment will experience more positive feeling on his or her work and have lower level of turnover intention (Lee, et al., 2000). This positive feeling is believed to influence a person's intention to stay in the occupation. Comparing with organizational commitment, occupational commitment is more likely to be a key variable in turnover intention (Goswami et al., 2007).

Turnover intention is not the same as turnover behavior (Klassen and Chiu, 2011) although turnover intention and actual behavior are closely inter-related. The high turnover intention may not cause turnover behavior but it affects an individual's motivation to engage in the desired behavior (Ajzen et al., 2009). The high level of turnover intention also leads educators' work-related stress such as burnout, depression, poor performance, absenteeism and low levels of job satisfaction (Klassen and Chiu, 2011). In contrast, educators with high occupational commitment shows high level of problem solving capacity and react positively emotions on their work (Zhang et al., 2012).

### The possible antecedents of occupational commitment

In previous research, the possible antecedents of occupational commitment have been widely identified. The following antecedents are the most commonly identified by scholars.

#### *1. Demographic individual differences*

In previous studies, the relationships between occupational commitment and demographic individual characteristics have been widely studied. Snape, et al. (2008) found that women demonstrated higher levels of affective occupational commitment while men tended to have higher levels of continuance occupational commitment. Irving, et al. (1997)

also found that men reported significantly higher continuance occupational commitment than women but found no differences on affective occupational commitment.

Other than gender, Meyer, et al. (1993) found that age and occupational tenure were negatively related to affective occupational commitment, but positively related to continuance occupational commitment. In Colarelli & Bishop (1990) research, most of respondents believed that an individual will have fewer career options when he or she gets older and it leads higher continuance occupational commitment. Tang, et al. (2012) pointed out that older workers with longer tenure may have greater job satisfaction due to having received better positions. Eventually, they have higher occupational commitment.

## *2. Job characteristics*

Job characteristics are widely investigated among scholars. Different scholars categorize the elements of job characteristics in different ways. Karasek (1979) developed a well-known demand-control model (DCM) to measure the relationship between burnout and job characteristics. The research found that job strain is strongly related to high job demands (such as heavy workload and time pressure) as well as low control. Another model of job characteristics is the effort-reward imbalance (ERI) model suggested by Siegrist (1996). The ERI model emphasizes reward from job instead of job control. In the ERI model, job strain is caused by the imbalance between job demands and reward. Reward can be salary, recognition from the employers and promotion opportunities. Demerouti, et al. (2001) modified these two models and develop a new model which is Job Demands-Resources model (JDR model). Demerouti, et al. (2001) believe that the importance of job control and

rewards are various depending on the job nature of different occupations. The JDR model is more flexible and rigorous.

The relationship between job characteristics and occupational commitment has been shown in previous literature. Lee, et al. (2000) found that occupational commitment is positively correlated with autonomy and supervisor support. It is also found that employees tend to have lower occupational commitment and higher intention to withdraw from the occupation when they frequently encounter negative work experiences and interpersonal interactions (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999). However, no previous literature investigates the link between occupational commitment and each item of job characteristics.

### *3. Self-actualization and Altruistic Personality*

Another possible antecedent of occupational commitment is self-actualization needs at work. Self-actualization is defined as a continual change of tension of a man which enables him/her to actualize his/her further activities, according to his/her nature (Seeman, 1948, Maslow, 1943). The term “self-actualization at work” is not clearly defined by scholars nonetheless, the importance of self-actualization at work is well recognized by scholars. Maslow (1973) pointed out that if individuals do not perceive their jobs as meaningful and purposeful jobs, they cannot go through self-actualization process and thus cannot work up their professional capacity. Individuals can be motivated by their self-actualization needs and their work is a means for them to achieve the fulfillment of self-actualization needs (Agarwal, 1993).

The importance of educator’s sense of self-actualization at work is also mentioned in education research. Self-actualization needs in education work can also be interpreted as the

psychological and spiritual needs of educators (Yang, 2012). The educators with psychological and spiritual fulfillment have strong sense of belonging and strong sense of responsibility for education work (Yang, 2012).

In reality, self-actualizing individuals often take actions to satisfy different levels of needs at the same time but not just to fulfill the needs of self-actualization alone (Maslow, 1970). The term “altruistic” has been used to describe the personality of self-actualizing individuals (Maslow, 1970). Altruistic personality is interpreted as the personality of individuals intended to benefit another and selfless characteristics (Razaque, 2012). Altruistic or self-actualizing educators are desired to help their students succeed and to improve society without concerning their own benefits and their fulfillment of self-actualization can be achieved through altruistic activities (Kyriacou and Coulthard, 2000; Struyven et al., 2013). However, there is lack of research studying the occupational commitment and self-actualization needs.

#### *4. Perceived occupational image*

Perceived occupational image refers to shared beliefs about the meaning of occupational membership with respect to the social status, capability, and behavior patterns of individual members (Birnbaum & Somers, 1989; Caplow, 1978; Grandy & Mavin, 2012). These shared beliefs are influenced by how individual members think that others perceive them as members of that occupation or profession (Lim et al., 2000). It is believed that perceived occupational image of an individual will influence his or her work behaviors and work attitudes.

Dimensions of perceived occupational image are not yet agreed among scholars. Based on the research conducted by Lim, et al. (2000), perceived occupational image mainly consists of two dimensions which are prestige and integrity. Occupational prestige refers to societal perceptions of job power and authority and thus reflects the social standing of a particular occupation (Korman et al., 1983). Occupational integrity is defined as the degree to which an individual designs and lives his or her life in accordance with her values, strengths, and meaning (Pentland and McColl, 2008). It is an essential precondition to life balance and can be achieved through well balance between work and life (Pentland and McColl, 2008).

Lim, et al. (2000) found that perceived occupational image is positively associated with organizational commitment and job satisfaction but negatively associated with intention to leave an organization or occupation. Lim, et al. (2000) particularly mentioned that occupational image may have stronger links to normative commitment than other types of commitment. Meyer, et al. (1993) showed that there is a strong correlation between continuance commitment to the occupation and to the organization. They suggested that "continued employment in an organization requires continued involvement in the occupation" (p. 547).

## **Research Methodology**

To explore the possible key antecedents of occupational commitment among Hong Kong hospitality educators, for this part of the study a qualitative research method is adopted. Qualitative research methods should be used for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem and to identify the possible variables including both outcome and process variables (Arendt et al., 2012). The main purpose of focus group interviews is to gain insights into the reasons for entering the hospitality education profession and to ascertain the key antecedents of occupational commitment among Hong Kong hospitality educators. Focus group interviews were used to collect a range of opinions regarding occupational commitment of hospitality educators and the possible antecedents of occupational commitment of hospitality educators are explored. In this study, four focus group interviews with twenty hospitality educators have been conducted in Hong Kong in June and July, 2014.

Purposive sampling is adopted in this study. Purposive sampling is described as “a random selection of sampling units within the segment of the population with the most information on the characteristic of interest (Guarte and Barrios, 2006, p.277).” The respondents are identified based on their current occupations. It is believed that the current Hong Kong hospitality educators should be the target group with the most useful information for this study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Six male and fourteen female Hong Kong hospitality educators participated in the focus group interviews. The demographic background of twenty interviewees has been shown in Table 1. At the beginning of the interviews, the different meanings of occupational commitment and

organizational commitment have been clearly explained to the interviewees in order to avoid confusion.

*Table 1: Demographic background of the interviewees*

Focus Groups		Date	Gender	Job position	Academic qualification	Teaching Experience
FG01	A1	3rd June, 2014	Female	Instructor	Master degree	Less than 3 years
	A2		Male	Instructor	Master degree	More than 10 years
	A3		Male	Lecturer	Doctoral degree	More than 10 years
	A4		Female	Instructor	Master degree	3-5 years
	A5		Female	Lecturer	Master degree	More than 10 years
	A6		Female	Instructor	Master degree	More than 10 years
FG02	B1	9th July, 2014	Female	Instructor	Master degree	Less than 3 years
	B2		Female	Assistant Professor	Doctoral degree	5-10 years
	B3		Male	Associate Professor	Doctoral degree	More than 10 years
	B4		Female	Assistant Professor	Doctoral degree	5-10 years
	B5		Female	Instructor	Master degree	5-10 years
FG03	C1	11th July, 2014	Female	Assistant professor	Doctoral degree	5-10 years
	C2		Male	Lecturer	Master degree	More than 10 years
	C3		Female	Lecturer	Master degree	More than 10 years
	C4		Female	Instructor	Master degree	3-5 years
	C5		Female	Assistant Professor	Doctoral degree	More than 10 years
FG04	D1	14th July, 2014	Female	Assistant Professor	Doctoral degree	5-10 years
	D2		Male	Instructor	Master degree	5-10 years
	D3		Female	Associate Professor	Doctoral degree	More than 10 years
	D4		Male	Instructor	Master degree	5-10 years

In the focus group interviews, the key questions are “why do hospitality educators commit to hospitality education as their career?” and “what factors influence hospitality educators commit to hospitality education industry?” Probe questions have also been asked in order to gain deep insights into the interviewees’ thoughts.

The interview script is analyzed by thematic analysis method in order to gain insight into hospitality educators’ thoughts towards their occupational commitment in hospitality education sectors. Thematic analysis should be used when there are no previous studies dealing with the similar phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coded categories are derived directly from the text data. Thematic analysis can be used for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes from the interview script (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the thematic analysis method is chosen to gain insight into hospitality educators’ thoughts towards their occupational commitment in hospitality education sectors. The six steps of thematic analysis have been undertaken which are (1) familiarization of data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) search for themes and sub-themes, (4) refining themes and sub-themes (5) defining themes and sub-themes (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From the transcription, 106 codes have been generated and categorized to 15 sub-themes and 3 themes which has outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Themes, sub-themes and illustrating quotes of the antecedents of occupational commitment

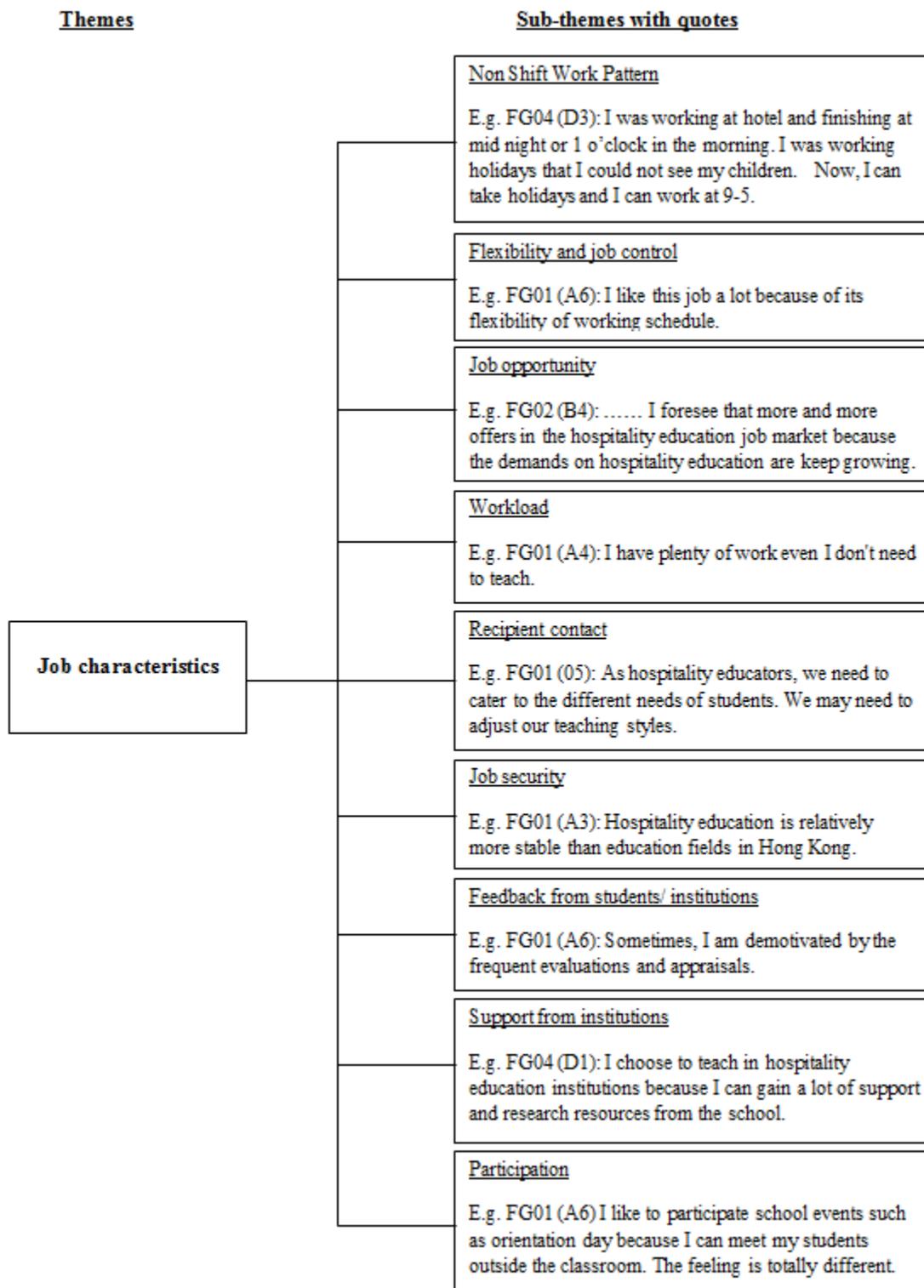
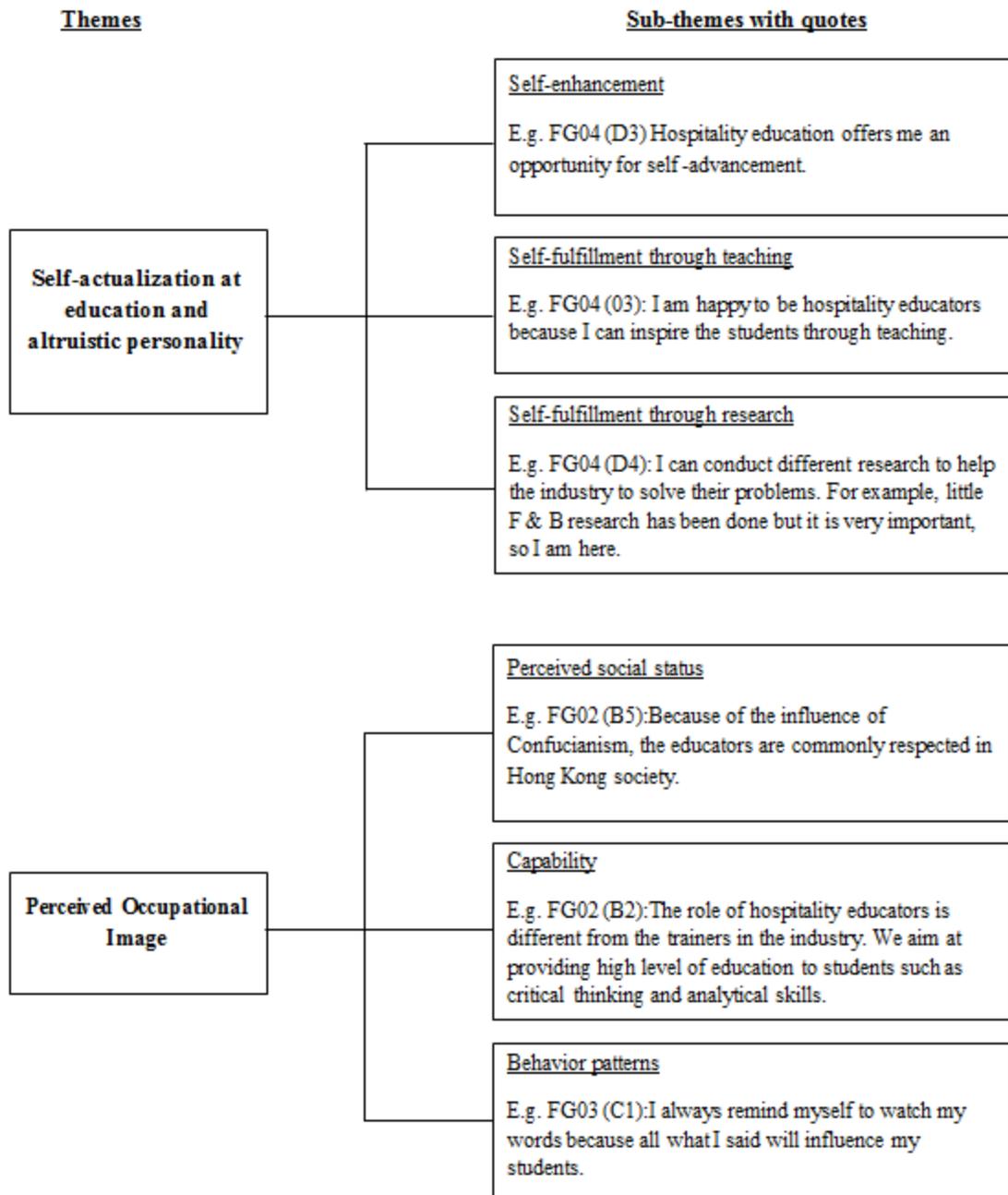


Figure 2 (cont.)



Through the focus group interviews, job characteristics were frequently discussed.

### Job characteristics

#### 1. Non-shift work pattern

The non-shift work pattern, job security, high job control and flexibility are the main job characteristics affecting their career choice as hospitality educators. Some interviewees mentioned that they like non-shift work pattern in hospitality education industry and having the same holiday patterns with their parents and friend so that they can manage their working and social life at the same time. However, some interviewees indicated that their work pattern is no longer stable because evening classes becomes more and more common in Hong Kong.

Examples:

*“FG03(C4): If I was still working in hospitality industry, my social circle would be very small and only have my colleagues. I would need to work when my family and old friends were having holidays. This problem will not be happened in hospitality education industry. Therefore, I like the work pattern in hospitality education industry that I can manage my work as well as my social circle.”*

*“FG04(D3): I was working at hotel and finishing at mid night, or 1 o'clock in the morning. I was working holidays that I could not see my children. Now, I can take holidays and I can work at 9-5.”*

#### 2. Flexibility and job control

In addition to non-shift work pattern, the flexible and high job control characteristics of hospitality education job also attract them to join the industry. They are commonly agreed that

many hospitality educators stay this industry because of the flexible work schedule. It makes them feel more able to manage their teaching, research work as well as their personal matters. It is valued to note that both single and married hospitality educators have the similar opinions in this regard.

Examples:

*“FG01(A2): I can make the decision on my working schedule. I can mark all assignments within few days or more than a week. In hospitality industry, the work is always out of my control. For example, you have to handle the customer complaints immediately .”*

*“FG01(A6): I like this job a lot because of its flexibility of working schedule.”*

### 3. Job opportunity

It is interesting to find that the sustainability of hospitality education industry may influence whether they will stay in hospitality education but not other education fields. Comparing with other education fields, hospitality education in Hong Kong is more sustainable because hospitality industry is a major pillar of the economy of Hong Kong (The Information Services Department HKSAR, 2012). They can foresee that there are more and more job and promotion opportunities.

Examples:

*“FG02(B4): Hospitality industry is very important and a sustainable industry in Hong Kong and I can foresee that hospitality industry will be playing an important role in Hong Kong economy in a long run. So, I foresee that more and more offers in the hospitality education job market because the demands on hospitality education are keep growing.”*

*“FG02(B3): The sustainability of hospitality education industry influence me whether I should stay in this industry or not. If the career opportunity or job security in hospitality education is poorer than my expectation, I may change my occupation which can provide more career opportunities for me.”*

### *Self-actualization at education and altruistic personality*

Other than job characteristics, the interviewees mentioned a lot about self-fulfillment through self-study, research and teaching. The interviewees indicated that they are passionate to be hospitality educators because they can inspire the students through teaching and sharing their experience. Some interviewees mentioned that they can contribute to hospitality industry through their research and their students. The result is consistent with the literature of self-actualization needs at work and altruistic personality (Kyriacou and Coulthard, 2000; Struyven et al., 2013).

Examples:

*FG01(A1): Many people have wrong perceptions that hospitality education is not a professional education. So, I come forward to show that hospitality education is a professional education.*

*FG02(B3): I am motivated to stay in hospitality education industry when my students have positive changes on their values towards their studies and their careers throughout their undergraduate studies.*

*FG04(D4): I like the research environment in hospitality education industry because I can conduct different research to help the industry to solve their problems. For example, little F & B research has been done but it is very important, so I am here.*

### Perceived occupational image

In addition to the job opportunities, the social status and the job image are the reasons for the interviewees to commit to hospitality education sector in Hong Kong. The interviewees stated that the hospitality educators are highly respected by the Hong Kong society. It may be because hospitality education is highly valued by The Hong Kong Government and the society. Also, because of the influence of Confucianism in Chinese community, the educators are highly respected by community (Yang et al, 2012).

Examples:

*“FG01(A2): No one is willing to be served by 60 year-old staff at hotel lobby but a 60 year-old professor is always viewed as a very experienced and professional expert. Even hotels do not want a 60 year-old staff. For example, how can a 60 year-old staff assists the guests for evacuation when a fire occurs at hotel?”*

*“FG02(B1): The social status of educators are very different among countries. Comparing to other countries, the social status of hospitality educators in Asia is higher especially in China and Hong Kong.....The social status of professors in university is not higher than other occupational in USA.”*

In summary, the flexibility of hospitality education work, non-shift work pattern and the self-actualization needs in education are the key antecedents of Hong Kong hospitality educators to commit to hospitality education as their career. The reasons for them to commit to the Hong Kong hospitality education sector are the career opportunities and perceived occupational image as hospitality educators in Hong Kong. Also, perceived occupational image and self-actualization needs in education are the possible key antecedents of occupational commitment. These two antecedents may be the unique antecedents of occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong. Therefore, there is a research need to have an in-depth study about how these unique antecedents influence the level of occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong.

### **Limitation and Future Research Direction**

This study is the first stage of a comprehensive study of hospitality educators in Hong Kong. After the completion of the study, the possible antecedents of occupational commitment of hospitality educators in Hong Kong have been identified. However, how these antecedents influence the level of occupational commitment is yet tested in this research.. The second stage of the comprehensive study is to test the relationships between the antecedents identified and the occupational commitment of Hong Kong hospitality educators. Quantitative research will be conducted because quantitative research method is more appropriate to test the strength and persistence of relationships between distinct measures (Tewksbury, 2009). Based on the result of this study, the conceptual model will be formulated and quantitative research will be conducted so as to find out how the key antecedents affect the level of the occupational commitment of Hong Kong hospitality educators.

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