



General self-efficacy's effect on career choice goals via vocational interests and person–job fit: A mediation model

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates a new mediation model, in which individuals' career choice goals are proposed to be influenced by the interplays of three influences including general self-efficacy, vocational interests, and person–job fit perceptions. Soon-to-be graduates of Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) who just finalized their placement in the industry responded to self-completed questionnaires. They were 302 senior undergraduates from two institutes of higher education in tourism and hospitality on China's Hainan Island. The four indirect causal paths within this mediation model include: (a) general self-efficacy → person–job fit → choice goals, (b) general self-efficacy → vocational interests → choice goals, (c) general self-efficacy → vocational interests → person–job fit, and (d) vocational interests → person–job fit → choice goals. The results of structural equation modeling indicate that these four paths are all statistically significant and all the hypotheses regarding these paths therefore gain empirical support. The study's findings as well as their implications are discussed within the context of self-efficacy theory, career development theory, and human resource development practices in the hospitality and tourism domain.

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1. Introduction

Globally there is a rise in demand for well-trained *hospitality and tourism management* (HTM) professionals. However, there is a remarkable decline in the number of HTM graduates joining the hospitality and tourism industry (e.g., Barron and Maxwell, 1993; Chuang and Jenkins, 2010; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; Lam and Ching, 2007; Richardson, 2009, 2010; Song and Chathoth, 2008, 2010, 2011; Teng, 2008; Zhang Qiu and Wu, 2004). The existing problem of attracting and retaining quality employees in the industry has resulted in worldwide labor and skill shortage, an issue that is both regarded as one of the top 10 issues in the hospitality and tourism industry and considered to have a huge impact on the industry as well (International Society of Hospitality Consultants, 2006; Richardson, 2010).

China is not an exception to this problem (Gu et al., 2006; Song and Chathoth, 2008). Each year a large number of students enter hospitality and tourism schools. This indicates that the students have the potential to become professionals in the industry. However, many of the students abandon their career goals in the

industry after graduation (Song and Chathoth, 2008). It is estimated that each year approximately 80% of the HTM undergraduate students in Mainland China give up their career goals in the industry after graduation (e.g., Liu, 2005; Wong and Liu, 2010).

In response to this problem, many scholars have sought to understand the nature of HTM undergraduates' career choice behavior. Thus far, they have identified a number of factors that affect people's choice behavior and/or behavioral intentions. Among these identified influences, some are environmental/situational determinants including parental influences, contextual support and barrier, academic major, educational experiences, internship experiences (e.g., Chuang and Jenkins, 2010; Chuang et al., 2009; Song and Chathoth, 2008, 2010, 2011; Wong and Liu, 2010). Others are personal influences such as individual's self-efficacy, self-esteem, personality, work value and attitude, vocational interests, career outcome expectations (e.g., Chuang and Jenkins, 2010; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; Song and Chathoth, 2008, 2010, 2011; Teng, 2008; Wong and Liu, 2009). Still others (e.g., Teng, 2008; Song and Chathoth, 2010, 2011) include moderation and mediation effects among the variables of interest relating to HTM undergraduates' career preferences.

Despite the strides and progress made in career choice research, there have been many research gaps in the literature of vocational choice behavior in general (e.g., Osipow, 1990; Price, 2009; McIlveen and Patton, 2006; Tinsley, 2006; Walsh, 2001) and in the

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hospitality and tourism literature in particular (e.g., Chuang, 2005; Chuang and Jenkins, 2010; Song and Chathoth, 2008). One notable gap is that the multivariate influences of *general self-efficacy*, *vocational interests*, and *person–job fit* as well as the interplays among these three in the prediction of *choice goals* have not been integratively explored in the literature. Such influences are also known as personal agency exercised by people to direct their own choice behavior (Brown and Lent, 2005). Moreover, these personal influences are known as more proximal and influential to individual's career decision-making. These personal influences are essentially intermediate variables that not only influence career choice outcomes (e.g., choice goals), but also are reflective of a more distal set of personal (e.g., gender, health status), environmental (e.g., background), and developmental (e.g., learning experience) influences (Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 2006). As such, it is necessary and useful for researchers to explore such joint effects focusing on individual's personal influences that are proximal to the choice process of career decision-making.

The goal of this study is therefore to propose and test a new mediation model, in which individuals' choice goals are influenced by the interplays among three personal influences including general self-efficacy, vocational interests, and person–job fit. Specifically, the research objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to explore general self-efficacy's potential indirect effects on choice goals via vocational interests and person–job fit, respectively; (2) to explore vocational interests' potential mediating role in the relationship between general self-efficacy and person–job fit; and (3) to explore person–job fit's potential mediating role in the relationship between vocational interests and choice goals.

In the career development literature, specific self-efficacy has been well theorized and it has attracted much empirical attention thus far. However, its counterpart of general self-efficacy has often been neglected. The breakthrough of this study therefore lies in the fact that general self-efficacy has its indirect effects on choice goals through vocational interests and person–job fit, respectively. In the sections that follow, an issue regarding general versus specific self-efficacy is addressed, key theoretical lenses on the vocational choice behavior are reviewed, and the four constructs contained in the present model are described, following which research hypotheses are developed for this study.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. General versus specific self-efficacy

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) holds that self-efficacy vary on three dimensions: (a) magnitude (how well one can perform a task), (b) strength (how confident one is of his or her judgments on how well one can perform a task), and (c) generality (the extent to which magnitude and strength beliefs generalize across tasks and situations). Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in his or her capacity to muster the cognitive, motivational, and behavioral resources required to perform in a given situation. Due to Bandura's such restrictive words as "a given situation," self-efficacy has been given a narrow focus (Chen et al., 2001). Consequently, most researchers have limited their research to the magnitude and strength dimensions, conceptualizing and studying self-efficacy as only a task or domain specific construct (Chen et al., 2001; Lee and Bobko, 1994; Scherbaum et al., 2006).

Researchers have recently become interested in the more trait-like generality dimension of self-efficacy, which is termed *general self-efficacy* (Chen et al., 2001; Scherbaum et al., 2006). Judge et al. (1998) defined general self-efficacy as "individuals' perception of their ability to perform across a variety of situations" (p. 170). General self-efficacy represents a global sense of confidence in one's coping

ability across a wide range of situations that are rather stressful, demanding, and/or difficult (Judge and Bono, 2001; Luthans et al., 2006). Moreover, general self-efficacy has been found to be significantly correlated to global self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional stability. Collectively, these four further form a broad, latent, higher-order trait: *core self-evaluation*, which is defined as "a basic, fundamental appraisal of worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person" (Judge et al., 2003, p. 304). As a result, both general self-efficacy and core self-evaluation have attracted more and more theoretical and empirical attention in many fields external to vocational psychology such as organizational and industrial psychology, organizational behavior, and educational science, among others (e.g., Judge et al., 1997, 2009).

In the field of vocational psychology, career specific self-efficacy is considered to be central to an individual's vocational thought and action and has accordingly received the lion's share of attention in research focusing on career constructs in social cognitive career theory (Betz and Hackett, 1997, 2006; Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 2006). In fact, career specific self-efficacy is seen to have a number of forms and two of the most frequently appeared ones are *content or task-specific self-efficacy* and *process self-efficacy* (Lent and Brown, 2006). The former refers to "beliefs in one's ability to perform the specific tasks required to succeed within a given domain under normative condition"; the latter denotes to "perceived ability to manage generic tasks necessary for career preparation, entry, adjustment, or change across diverse occupational paths" (Lent and Brown, 2006, p. 5). An example of process self-efficacy is *career decision-making self-efficacy* (Betz and Luzzo, 1996). Likewise, *vocational self-efficacy* (Ali et al., 2005) is an example of task-specific self-efficacy. A review of the career self-efficacy literature (e.g., Ali et al., 2005; Betz, 2007; Betz and Hackett, 2006; Lent and Brown, 2006; Lent et al., 2003) indicated that career self-efficacy usually relates to a number of other social cognitive career variables such as vocational interests, outcome expectations, choice goals, among others. Among the few exceptions, Chuang and Jenkins (2010) and Chuang (2005) found that career decision-making self-efficacy did not predict HTM undergraduates' choice goals.

2.2. Major career choice theories

According to Patton and McMahon (2006), career choice has a system of influences including a variety of individual, developmental, social, and environmental variables. Generally, these influences are viewed by vocational theorists through three different but related lenses, namely, developmental, person–environmental fit, and social–cognitive perspectives.

2.2.1. Social-cognitive perspective

Social cognitive career theory is primarily rooted from Bandura's (1986, 1997) general social cognitive theory, which emphasizes complex ways in which people, their behavior and their environment, mutually influence one another. It stresses the means by which individuals exercise personal agency–self-efficacy beliefs, vocational interests, outcome expectation beliefs–to guide their own vocational behavior and to assemble their own puzzle; yet, it also acknowledges the many other personal and environmental influences that serve to strengthen, weaken, or even override human agency in their career development (Brown and Lent, 2005; Lent et al., 1994). Among its many merits, social cognitive career theory is essentially an integrative model with a unique contribution to vocational theory. On the one hand, vocational theorists (e.g., Lent et al., 1994) stress the importance of self-efficacy's role in people's vocational behavior. But on the other hand, they operationalize self-efficacy as *career specific self-efficacy* only with a

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