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Critical Discourse Analysis of a government publicity campaign in Hong Kong

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Re-envisioning Vocational Education:

Critical Discourse Analysis of a government publicity campaign in Hong Kong

Abstract

Purpose: Vocational education in Hong Kong suffers from an image problem. Stakeholders often perceive it as a second-best option for those who fail to advance in academic education. In 2016, to promote vocational education, the Hong Kong government launched a publicity campaign and rebranded Vocational Education and Training (VET) as Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET). This study critically analyzes the new discourse crafted by this campaign and assesses its potential to change VPET's status.

Methodology: This study applies critical discourse analysis to the set of television public service advertisements produced as part of the government publicity campaign.

Findings: The messaging of the publicity campaign consists of two major discursive strategies. One stresses the ability to find self-fulfillment through VPET. The other stresses the academic ability and middle-class status of VPET students as well as the non-manual and high-end career opportunities for graduates. While the first strategy offers a new basis on which to value VPET, the second recreates assumptions about the value of academic achievement and what constitutes respectable employment, even as it attempts to challenge stereotypes. It reinforces that the ultimate goal of education is financial gain and social status. It overlooks other values of education and the potential value of VPET in enhancing individual choice and agency.

Social implication: The government could consider reframing their messaging in terms of the diverse values and experiences of VPET students. Highlighting the values that VPET students themselves see in their education provides alternative discourses that can better challenge hegemonic ideas.

Research limitation: Discourse analysis does not provide information about audience perceptions and interpretations.

Originality: To the best of our knowledge, this is the first discourse analysis of the government's publicity campaign to promote VPET.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, vocational education, professional education, public service advertising

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Introduction

The poor public reputation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a problem that governments around the world have grappled with for decades (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018). In both developed and developing countries, VET is often seen as a fallback for those who fail to progress in the academic track (Billett et al., 2020; Stalder et al., 2022). Many of those working to reform and uplift the VET sector see the inferior image of vocational education as an important obstacle, discouraging investment and student interest in VET and hindering efforts to create change (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018; Stalder et al., 2022). To attract and retain learners, they perceive an urgent need to improve the image of VET. Governmental efforts to strengthen vocational education thus often include efforts to change public perception—to make it a credible and appealing alternative pathway to academic education in the eyes of young people, parents, careers advisers, educators, and employers (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education, 2024; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018). The Hong Kong government’s mid-2010s publicity campaign to rebrand and reform the image of vocational education is one example of such an attempt.

Like many governments around the world, the Hong Kong government sees a critical role for VET in cultivating the workforce necessary to support economic growth. However, VET continues to be seen as an inferior choice by the public (Yau & Chun, 2020). In other words, students and families see academic education as the generally superior choice, and vocational education as a fallback option. Reforming the image of VET thus became a policy goal in the course of the government’s attempt to revitalize the sector. Vocational education in Hong Kong is offered by a variety of providers, including the various public providers grouped under the Vocational Training Council, Hong Kong’s publicly funded universities, as well as various private training institutions

(Task Force, 2020). It includes Diploma programs and vocationally-oriented electives at the secondary level, and Higher Diploma and vocationally-oriented Bachelor's degree programs at the post-secondary level (Task Force, 2020). After the early 2000s, driven by the expansion of higher education and reforms to secondary education, secondary-level vocational schools in Hong Kong gradually disappeared (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2015). The sector shifted towards post-secondary programs, and vocational education was later reintroduced at the secondary level as Applied Learning electives (Chun et al., 2022; Legislative Council Secretariat, 2015). Despite these changes, VET's low-end reputation persisted. Government surveys and public engagement in 2014-2015 found that stakeholders continued to perceive vocational education as a lower qualification more suited for those not eligible for university education (Task Force, 2015). As one way to address this problem, in 2015, the Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education recommended a rebranding of Vocational Education and Training (VET) as Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) and a publicity campaign to promote this new name and image.

Eight years after the VPET rebranding campaign, there has been limited analysis of its content or effects. One 2016 survey experiment found that the name VPET elicited greater support than VET among parents with higher incomes, but was actually less popular among lower income parents (Lee et al, 2022). The same experiment found that even with the name VPET, parental support for vocational education declined whenever parents assumed that their children had adequate scores to enter university, thus indicating that VPET continues to be perceived as a second-best option relative to academic education (Lee *et al.*, 2022). Meanwhile, the research of the 2018 Task Force, two years into the effort to revamp the image of vocational education, found that while students overall reported a positive impression of VPET, the percentage of students willing to pursue it had barely changed since 2015. Only 20% of surveyed students were willing to pursue vocational education, the most common reason for unwillingness being "their academic results allowed them to pursue better education opportunities" (Task Force, 2020). The number of candidates for Applied

Learning subjects on the HKDSE declined between their initial introduction and 2018, reflecting a still low rate of public acceptance (Yau & Chun, 2020). These studies suggest that the VPET rebranding effort has made some differences but has made little progress towards the goal of parity in status.

To the best of our knowledge, studies of the effectiveness of the rebranding campaign are limited to the Task Force's (2020) research and the survey experiment by Lee et al. (2022). There have not yet been studies examining the content of the rebranding campaign or analyzing it qualitatively. Yau *et al.* (2018) have applied critical discourse analysis to examine the discursive construction of vocational education in Hong Kong policy from the 1970s through to mid-2010s. However, there has been no prior analysis of the discourse of the rebranding campaign. Given the goal of the rebranding campaign to reconfigure the discourse around vocational education, this constitutes an important gap in the literature. This study therefore employs critical discourse analysis to examine the messaging of the Hong Kong government's VPET rebranding campaign and to analyze to what extent it challenges the power structures that construct VPET's inferior status. It asks both how the rebranding campaign challenges prior language practices, and what unequal power structures it continues to embody and reproduce. The findings provide insight into the structures of social power that contribute to VPET's inferior status in Hong Kong and how these might be challenged through discourse change, while identifying pitfalls to avoid. They may also have implications for addressing the problem of VPET's low status in other regions of the world.

In the subsequent sections, we first provide background on the situation of vocational education in Hong Kong. Secondly, we introduce the methodology of the study. Then, through a review of the literature, we construct a theoretical framework to understand VET's inferior status. This is followed by a critical discourse analysis of the three television public service advertisements produced for the rebranding campaign. The discussion and conclusion connect this analysis back to

the broader context of VET reform and draw implications for policymakers and public campaign strategists in Hong Kong and beyond.

Background: Vocational education in Hong Kong

From early on, in a Chinese culture that values academic achievement, vocational education was perceived as an inferior choice for lower achieving students (Yau *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, vocational education proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s, as the territory's manufacturing boom created pressing demand for skilled labor. It was a common choice for young people, providing a pathway into abundant jobs in manufacturing (Task Force, 2015). In the 1990s, however, the manufacturing jobs that had once fueled Hong Kong's economy began to disappear and demand for vocational education suffered (Leung & Tse, 2018; Task Force, 2015). After the handover of sovereignty to China in 1997, the Hong Kong Education Department recommended an integration process that would eliminate the distinction between academic and vocational secondary schools, cementing the decline of secondary-level VET (Leung & Tse, 2018). In 2000, the Hong Kong government announced a goal to expand higher education enrollment to 60% of secondary graduates (Ng *et al.*, 2021). Expanded opportunities for higher education increased the appeal of academic programs, which unlike employment-oriented VET, are oriented towards continued study (Leung & Tse, 2018). Furthermore, with the New Academic Structure reforms introduced in 2009, secondary schooling was reduced from seven years to six and became free through Secondary 6, further reducing the demand for secondary-level vocational education (Task Force, 2015). In response, Hong Kong VET underwent fundamental shifts and reoriented towards service sector and higher-level technical training (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2015). The rapid growth of higher education after 2000 consisted largely of self-financed sub-degree programs (Lee, 2016; Ng *et al.*, 2021). These included both vocational Higher Diploma programs and a newly created academic sub-degree qualification known as an Associate Degree (Lee, 2016).

After the 1990s, the popularity of vocational education dwindled and its reputation as a less desirable option deepened (Leung & Tse, 2018). The general public perceived students in technical and vocational schools as those with low motivation to learn and a lack of aspiration for university education (Yuen *et al.*, 2018). The Hong Kong government, however, continued to see an important role for vocational education in supporting economic growth and sought to reinvigorate the sector. Thus, it sought to enhance the provision, quality, and image of vocational education. In 2003, it began piloting vocationally oriented electives known as Applied Learning (ApL) courses in secondary schools, which became the main focus of vocational education promotion at the secondary school level (Task Force, 2015). It also attempted to increase awareness of diverse education pathways through Career and Life Planning Education in secondary schools (Task Force, 2015). Another important measure was the creation in 2008 of an accreditation mechanism for educational qualifications, known as the Qualifications Framework (QF). The QF consists of a 7-tier ranking of qualifications and standards for each tier. It allows VET courses to obtain accreditation and asserts formal equivalence between academic and vocational qualifications ranked at the same level (Leung & Tse, 2018; Task Force, 2020). Accreditation is based on Specific Competency Standards drawn up by Industry Training Advisory Committees, to ensure that VET is in line with industry needs.

The Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education was set up in 2014 recommended that vocational education be rebranded as Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET). It suggested a publicity campaign to promote a new image for vocational education, stressing points such as the equal ability of VPET students, the opportunities available for further study, and the promising careers available to VPET graduates (Task Force, 2015). The subsequent 2018 Task Force on Promotion of Vocational and Professional Education and Training continued to recommend publicity to change VPET's image (Task Force, 2020). However, despite these efforts to rebrand and promote a new image of VPET, its inferior status has been hard to shake (Lee *et al.*, 2022; Task Force, 2020).

Methodology

As policy intervention utilizing discourse change to address the problem of vocational education's low social status, Hong Kong's VPET publicity campaign readily lends itself to critical discourse analysis (CDA). This study thus employs CDA, and in particular Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach, as a basic framework to analyze how the discourse surrounding vocational education contributes to its inferior status and to what extent the rebranding campaign challenges this.

Discourse and power: the theoretical foundations of critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis is a methodology that analyzes how power relations are manifested in and recreated through language (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 2013). It is rooted in the theory that language is non-neutral, acting as an important mechanism for reinforcing and naturalizing existing social power structures (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Key ideas that have informed critical discourse analysis include Foucault's theory of "power-knowledge" and Gramsci's theory of "hegemony" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Power-knowledge refers to the idea that knowledge is always shaped by power, while itself exerting power. Hegemony, meanwhile, describes a state of dominance over the realm of ideas that upholds a particular power structure. Through that ideological dominance, willing or unconscious compliance with the system is secured from even those who may be its victims. Critical discourse analysis consists of a diverse array of methods and does not have any singular defining methodology (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). It insists on interdisciplinarity and connecting linguistic/semiotic analysis to social analysis in order to examine the interrelationship between language and social problems (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The focus is on uncovering the hidden power structures within language and questioning the assumptions behind everyday usage of language and symbols.

The Dialectical-Relational Approach

The dialectical-relational approach adopted in this study places concern with social injustices at the center of its methodology. It proposes a four-step procedure (Fairclough, 2009). The first step is to “focus on a social wrong, in its semiotic aspect” (Fairclough, 2009). This roots the analysis in tackling a social injustice and its reflection in language. It involves first theorizing the social problem in an interdisciplinary way, to provide context to critically understand the network of social practices in which the discourse is embedded (Fairclough, 2009). The second step of the framework is to identify the obstacles to addressing that wrong. This involves the semiotic analysis of texts (including multimedia) related to the problem and connecting these texts to the network of social practices and discourses with which they are dialectically interrelated (i.e., interdiscursive analysis). It looks at both how representations of a particular topic are constructed and how these are related to other social practices, discourses, and structures. This helps to identify biases or omissions in how an issue is semiotically constructed and how this is shaped by social power structures. The third step is to examine if the current social order in some way relies upon the social wrong identified. This calls for deeper thinking about whether the social wrong can be addressed within the current social order, or whether it is more fundamentally embedded in larger power structures and requires broader change. The fourth step is to identify possible ways of tackling the social problem by addressing the identified obstacles.

Sample selection

As a specific object for discursive analysis, this study focuses on the set of public service advertisements (a.k.a., Announcements in the Public Interest or APIs) produced as part of the rebranding campaign. The production of APIs was among the measures recommended by the 2014 Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education for promoting a new professional image of VPET.

The APIs illustrate how the Task Force's call for a new discourse of vocational education has been interpreted and elaborated and the form in which this new discourse has been seen by the public.

While the rebranding publicity campaign also operated through other channels, such as school-based information distribution and online mediums, APIs in particular were chosen for this analysis they are an active form of information distribution that has broad reach in Hong Kong. This makes them a good choice for examining the new portrayals of vocational education that broadly reached the public. In Hong Kong, the Communications Authority's licensing requirements stipulate that all free-to-air broadcast stations (including radio and television) must broadcast one minute of the government's public services advertisements every hour free of charge. This makes the government effectively the largest advertiser in Hong Kong (Chan & Zhang, 2019). The obligatory and frequent nature of API broadcasting makes them a powerful form of information dissemination policy intervention.

The VPET publicity campaign APIs were collected from the Hong Kong government's Information Services Department website, where government-produced APIs are archived. There are altogether three APIs on Vocational and Professional Education and Training. All three were included in this study. Each video is thirty seconds long and all date from 2016—the year after the Task Force proposed the publicity campaign. Advertisements and promotional videos produced by vocational education providers such as the Vocational Training Council were not included in this study, as these mainly promote the reputation of the institution.

Procedure

Following Fairclough's (2009) four-step dialectical-relational approach, this study begins by constructing a broad theoretical understanding of the social problem in question—namely the inferior image of vocational education. Secondly, it turns to a detailed discursive analysis of the chosen texts—the APIs produced to promote the new professional image of VPET. This involved the two

authors watching the videos many times, listing and coding the visuals, the texts, and the subtexts independently, and then comparing and discussing interpretations of the semiosis in the videos. Policy papers such as the Task Force reports were referenced in analyzing and interpreting the data (Task Force 2015; 2020). In the subsequent discussion section, insights from the discursive analysis are connected back to the broader theorization of the social problem, in order to assess how deep the obstacles to change lie. Finally, in light of the analysis, the paper explores potential ways for overcoming the obstacles that inhibit vocational education achieving greater social respect.

Theoretical Framework

Second class: vocational education and the class divide

Scholars and policymakers point to a number of factors contributing to the widespread phenomenon of vocational education being seen as inferior to academic education. The frequently cited culprits include cultural biases that respect mental over manual and differences in employment and earning potentials (Billett, 2011; Feinberg & Horowitz, 1990). The explanations posited in the Hong Kong context are similar, including traditional ideas and parental perceptions that favor academic education, the decline of the manufacturing economy, and the expansion of higher education (Task Force, 2015; Yau *et al.*, 2018). These proffer some immediate explanations for vocational education's low status. However, the inferior status of vocational education cannot be properly understood without an understanding of the broader structures of social inequality in which it is embedded. We can summarize these inequalities in terms of the concept of class (Relly, 2022)

In sociology, the concept of class refers to structured social and economic inequalities, but also invokes cultural, lifestyle, and identity differences between groups differentially situated in a socioeconomic hierarchy (Crompton, 2008). In Marxist analysis, class is seen as based on differential relationships with the system of production, which shapes distinct groups within society, and can

lead to polarization in society (Wright, 1998). Meanwhile, many mid-twentieth century sociologists have analyzed the growth of the middle classes and how changes in occupation structures might lead to class convergence—the reduction of the stark gaps between different sectors of society (Crompton, 2008; Wright, 1998). This stress on both material inequalities and the social and cultural hierarchies that develop alongside them make class a useful term to summarize the multidimensional hierarchies in society, rooted primarily in inequalities of wealth and power but accompanied by symbolic/cultural hierarchies such as those suggested by the idea of “upper class” vs. “lower class” attire. Furthermore, as both Marxists and theorists of the middle class have noted, class is strongly rooted in economic differences and often determined by occupation—a factor that is particularly important in our analysis given the relationship between vocational education and the occupational structure. We thus use the term “second class” to indicate the lower position in the social and economic hierarchy that vocational education holds with respect to academic education, and to indicate its embeddedness within broader class structures of socioeconomic and cultural inequality. These parallel hierarchies are illustrated in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Tracing the relationship between vocational education and other structures of social inequality historically and in the present day demonstrates how the inferior status of vocational education is both shaped by and reinforces class and occupational inequalities. Historically, academic education was education for the social elite, access to which was only gradually expanded with the massification of education systems. In Chinese culture, academic education preparing for the imperial examinations was historically the gateway to high society (Pepper, 2000). The political and economic elites of many countries today continue to be dominated by academic pedigrees (Billett, 2011; King & Martin, 2002; Relly, 2021). The modern-day vocational education sector, on the other hand, was historically designed for the laboring classes. It traces its roots to industrialization’s skilled labor needs. In many countries, like in Hong Kong, mass vocational

education systems were first set up to train skilled workers for the industrial economy (Billett, 2011). A pattern was established of academic education as education for the elite, preparing individuals for elite professional occupations, and vocational education as education for the working classes, preparing individuals for working class jobs, thus reinforcing class stratification (Relly, 2022). Despite changes over time, the inequality between academic and vocational education today has roots in this historical inequality. Academic education still bears the prestige which is an insignia of its historical association with elite society, while the low social status of the industrial working class has left its mark on the status of VET.

Neither is the class stratified nature of vocational education merely historical, even where it may no longer be oriented towards manual labor occupations. Social and economic differences between academic and vocational students both contribute to vocational education's inferior image and are reinforced by this discourse. There is certainly evidence that vocational education produces better learning and labor market outcomes for some groups or individuals (Billett, 2011). Furthermore, vocational education has great value in ways that cannot be represented solely by its labor market outcomes or by its position in the existing social hierarchy. Nevertheless, the overall profile of students and occupations served by the vocational sector still tend to be less privileged in the social hierarchy than those served by academic education (Billett, 2011). In Finland, vocational education was found to have beneficial labor market impacts for those selected into it; however, on average, graduates from academic secondary schools still had higher incomes in the long term (Silliman & Virtanen, 2022). In a Tanzanian study, Kahyarara and Teal (2008) found that for students at lower qualification levels, vocational qualifications may generate higher returns than equivalently ranked academic qualifications, but that no level of vocational qualification is associated with income as high as high-level academic qualifications. The massification of higher education has arguably only exacerbated this divide. In the context of academic education already enjoying greater respect, the flood of academic higher education graduates into the job market has

marginalized vocational graduates, with employers often by default preferring candidates with the academic credentials that are assumed to be superior (Relly, 2022). Meanwhile, elite decision-makers appear less and less likely to have a vocational education or manual labor background (Relly, 2022). Political elites have become all the more dominated by their academic pedigrees.

In Hong Kong, university degree education likewise retains a privileged social and economic standing relative to vocational education (Lee, 2016). Patterns of tertiary educational enrollment point a growing class divide in who is served by university education. In 2011, 48% of young people from the top 10% of wealthiest families were pursuing university degrees, while only 13% of those under the poverty line were doing so (Lee, 2016). Young people from families under the poverty-line were more likely to be enrolled in sub-degree programs, approximately two-thirds of which consist of vocational Higher Diploma programs (Lee, 2016). While a through-train system and high articulation rates help to reduce the barriers between vocational and academic pathways, post-secondary VPET remains focused on the sub-degree level of Higher Diploma programs and is more oriented towards employment than equivalent level academic pathways (Lim, 2010; Task Force, 2020). Approximately 40% of Higher Diploma graduates pursue further studies, but the rate for academic Associate Degree graduates is much higher at 80% (Task Force, 2020). In 2023, the median employment earnings of sub-degree holders was approximately sixty percent of those of degree holders (Census and Statistics Department, 2024). These all suggest that vocational education in Hong Kong remains articulated into a lower position than academic education within the occupational and class hierarchies. Relative to academic university education, vocational education tends to disproportionately serve more students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is associated with short periods of study, which are associated with lower income and lower positions in the class hierarchy. As Billett (2011) suggests, vocational education is characterized by its diversity, and thus conditions certainly vary by case and by industry. Certain vocational education programs such as those in information technology may feed into occupations with quite high social and economic

status. However, vocational education as a whole maintains an association with occupations and student class backgrounds lower in the social hierarchy.

The relationship of vocational education's second-class status to broader class and occupational inequalities is further demonstrated by the few exceptions to the dominant pattern. Notable exceptions to the pattern of vocational education's low status appear in places where its corresponding occupations have been accorded greater social respect and have social power through their organized constituencies. Germany's dual model of vocational education is much lauded as a well-functioning model of vocational education, which possesses social respect. This is sometimes explained in terms of the cultural value of *berufskonzept*, or the valuing of skilled work (Billett, 2011). However, these systems are also characterized by modernized guild structures which contribute heavily to vocational education (Billett, 2011). The organized structure of the occupations not only facilitates stronger organic connections between vocational education and industry but provides a space to cultivate and maintain occupational pride and provide practitioners with an organized voice. Likewise, in Mainland China, a period of high social respect for vocational education corresponded to a period when vocational education was managed by powerful state-owned enterprises that offered secure, well-paid, and socially respected industrial jobs (Chen, 2016; Pepper, 2000; Wang, 2023). However, with the disappearance of privileged state-owned enterprise jobs and the explosion of cheap labor-based export-oriented manufacturing, preference for academic education has once again become strongly entrenched (Chen, 2016). Vocational education in China today is stigmatized as a place for "bad students" (Chen, 2016; Ling, 2015). This status change is inextricable from the evidence that vocational education graduates now earn less and face more precarity than their academic-track counterparts, and the respectable jobs once associated with this type of education have disappeared (Wang & Wang, 2023).

In summary, the lower social standing of vocational education can only be understood within the context of the broader social structures of class and occupational hierarchies. These are both the

origin of vocational education's low social status and exist in a relationship of mutually reinforcement with vocational education.

Theorizing the roots of vocational education's second-class status in historical and contemporary class divides does not deny the possibility of change through discourse. Rather, it suggests that when we deal with the problem of vocational education's inferior status, we are also dealing with broader structures of class inequalities and class biases. In other words, vocational education's second class status is part of a broader logic of hierarchy that must also be challenged.

Bourdieu famously theorized the role of education systems, and in particular academic education, in reproducing the class structure and the culture of the dominant classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As structures not only of pedagogic transmission, but also of authority, schools tend to impose the *habitus* (i.e., style of thinking, perceiving, and acting conditioned by cultural background) of the socially dominant classes as the authoritatively correct one, reproducing the biases of dominant society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). These include biases about which occupations are more difficult or deserve more respect. On the other hand, many advocates of vocational education have seen its promotion as part of broader processes of social and cultural change (Billett, 2011). For John Dewey, notably, the promotion of vocational education was linked to promoting respect for practice and processes of personal emancipation through finding one's calling (Billett, 2011). Billett (2011) suggests "the need to go beyond the societal esteem directed towards particular occupations and the salaries they attract to understand the worth of particular vocations" (p. 40). The biases against vocational education are inscribed with a broader set of class biases, which its promotion can also contribute to changing. Effectively changing the discourse around vocational education must also involve confronting these other hegemonic ideas, which include class-biased notions of a hierarchy of respect for different groups of people and different occupations, and prioritization of hierarchical (economic or social status-based) measures of worth.

Analysis

In light of this broader framework, we proceed to analyze the messaging of the television APIs produced for the VPET publicity campaign and the extent to which they do or do not challenge dominant discourse. We label each of the videos for easy reference:

- API 1: “Vocational and Professional Education and Training— Leading you to a promising future” (Information Services Department, 2016a);
- API 2: “Vocational and Professional Education and Training— Finding a career based on your interests” (Information Services Department, 2016b);
- API 3: “Vocational and Professional Education and Training—Leading you to a professional pathway” (Information Services Department, 2016c).

As mentioned in the methodology, the text and semiosis of the videos were analyzed and coded by each of the authors separately, after which major themes were identified. The following section provides an analysis of this messaging under the rubric of five major themes, explicit and implicit. It then discusses the way in which this challenges or fails to challenge the dominant discourse. We begin with the explicit themes of the videos. We then proceed to examine the more subtle themes in the API messaging. Table 1 summarizes the major themes, examples of them in the videos, and ways in which they challenge or reinforce the dominant discourse that produces VPET’s second-class status.

Theme 1: VPET provides a “promising future”

The ability of VPET to provide graduates with a “promising future” is the titular theme of API 1: “Vocational and Professional Education and Training— Leading you to a promising future” (Information Services Department, 2016a). The details of the video’s portrayal of a “promising future” demonstrate what this is interpreted to mean.

The video begins with three VPET graduates addressing the audience and presenting their name cards. Their full names, job titles, and graduating programs are presented: Hayley Yu, Engineer, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering Program; Calvin Yuen, Service Manager, Hospitality and Tourism Program; and Aries Sin, Creative Director, Fashion Design Program. It then cuts to them in their work environments. Hayley is shown surveying a site, working in a computer lab, and presenting in a conference room. Calvin is pictured in a luxury hotel examining an elaborately plated meal, tasting wine, and explaining something to white customers as his white supervisor looks on with approval. Aries is portrayed instructing someone at a photo shoot and sketching designs for customers. In the accompanying narration, graduates talk about the “practical skills” and “professional knowledge” they gained before employment, their work readiness, and how VPET training made it possible to “excel in our industries.”

“Promising” has a very particular interpretation in this video. The featured work settings, attire, and people with which the graduates associate for the most part indicate high status within dominant social hierarchies. These include settings like luxury hotels that evoke high-class status and other symbols like suits and business cards or titles like “Manager” or “Director” that suggest “respectable” white-collar occupations. The use of white customers and managers, while brief, is a deliberate choice which uses racial associations between whiteness and high-class society to convey an elitist image of success. The “promising future” that this API portrays is one that evokes hegemonic, class-biased assumptions about respectability and success.

The basic strategy of the “promising future” message is to address VPET’s low social respect by challenging the association of VPET with lower status occupations. To some extent, the messaging reflects the reality today that VPET in Hong Kong has become more oriented more towards white collar para-professional and service-industry jobs. However, the elitist undertones in the portrayal of “promising future” in the video also accept the problematic assumption that jobs that are high status in the current social hierarchy are inherently what is desirable and respectable. This

reinforces current class biases about what constitutes “promising” and desirable occupations. While some VPET graduates may indeed work in high-class settings, VPET as a sector continues to serve many humbler occupations. We therefore might ask what this messaging suggests about the respectability of those VPET graduates who do not rise to the top of the competition.

This type of messaging, oriented towards challenging class *associations* rather than challenging class *biases*, could be contrasted with a distinctly different New Zealand VET promotion video, which portrays the appeal of vocational education in terms of adventure and valuable contributions to society rather than social status (CareersNZ, 2020). In this video, graduates are shown in socially essential positions such as in power stations and on construction sites and in exciting scenarios such as high up in the air fixing electrical wires or on ships in the middle of a vast ocean. Messaging like that in the New Zealand video adopts a different strategy to countering the low respect of vocational education: it portrays the merits and social value that VET has *beyond* its social status. This not only challenges the low respect of VET, but also the low respect of the many humbler occupations that VET serves, which do not get the respect they deserve in the current social hierarchy.

Theme 2: VPET is a chance to develop your interests and follow your passion

The message that VPET is a chance to develop one’s interests and follow one’s passion is most prominently featured in API 2: “Vocational and Professional Education and Training— Finding a career based on your interests” (Information Services Department, 2016b). It is also conveyed in API 3: “Vocational and Professional Education and Training—Leading you to a professional pathway” (Information Services Department, 2016c).

Developing one’s interests is the explicit theme of API 2. The API features two VPET students, who respectively develop an interest in cooking into a career as a chef and an interest in airplanes into a career in aircraft maintenance. The two characters are first portrayed pursuing their

hobbies at home, with one cooking and serving food to her family's approval, and the other fixing a model airplane and taking pictures of planes passing overhead. After a portrayal of the students' journeys through VPET, the video ends with scenes mirroring the opening ones. The chef smiles as her customers express satisfaction with her food. The aircraft technician enjoys watching planes pass overhead, this time in his work uniform. The video stresses the personal fulfillment students find by pursuing VPET careers that were in line with their interests.

Meanwhile, API 3 stresses uniqueness, diversity, and choosing one's own pathways. The first part of the video portrays a process of choosing VPET. It opens with the main character looking out over a panoramic scene of the Hong Kong cityscape, giving viewers a sense of vastness and possibility. It then cuts to people in various occupational outfits—including a nurse, construction worker, airline hostess, chef, and businessman—walking either normally or rotated onto their sides and on both straight and curved pathways. The narration that accompanies these unusual walking scenes states that, "Everyone can choose their pathway, straight or curved." The video then cuts to people walking confidently in different occupational attire. The main character stands in the middle of a crosswalk, looking at them, while the narrator states, "There's no need to follow others." She then turns around with a confident smile as the narrator states, "make your own choice." This first portion of the video emphasizes pride in daring to be different and choosing a non-traditional pathway like VPET. It also highlights the vast possibilities and options provided by VPET.

Together, these two APIs convey the sense that VPET offers many options, through which one can find a career suitable for oneself. They stress personal fulfillment through pursuing interests and making one's own choice, regardless of societal perceptions. Resonating with Dewey's belief that vocational education should be a chance for individuals to explore diverse pathways and find their own calling, this messaging allows vocational education to stand on its own strengths. It advertises the diversity and options that vocational education provides. It also encourages students to base their judgments of vocational education on a different set of standards from the dominant

societal ones, focusing on personal fulfillment rather than social status or economic reward.

Recalling Billett's (2011) assertion that if we are to revalue vocational education, we need to go beyond social esteem to focus on vocational education's inherent worth, this is a positive message that challenges not only the perceptions of vocational education as low value but challenges the underlying value framework which leads people to perceive it as low value.

Theme 3: VPET is suitable for students with strong academic ability

Theme 4: VPET is suitable for middle-class students

From the two explicit themes of the videos, we move onto the implicit themes. The theme that VPET is suitable for students with strong academic ability is subtly but clearly developed in API 2. This appears to correspond to one of the Task Force's suggested messages:

Students pursuing VPET are not inferior to those following the traditional academic route. VPET students may also have the ability to pursue traditional academic education but they have chosen VPET according to their own interests. In other words, VPET should not be regarded as a second choice. (Task Force, 2015, p. 88)

Alongside this message, there is another subtext that is developed concurrently—that middle class students can also choose VPET. Because these two messages are conveyed together, although they are different, they are discussed here together.

API 2's main theme is that VPET is a chance to develop one's interests, but it also sends the message that middle class students of high academic ability can choose VPET without shame. This is suggested through the class and academic background of the main characters, as detailed in the symbolism of the video's opening. Early in the video, a scene of a bookshelf is presented, on which sits a framed portrait of the female character holding a diploma and wearing glasses, with a scholastic award in the background. In the accompanying narration, the student states that she likes both studying and cooking. The video then cuts to her cooking Western cuisine, serving food to her

family, and receiving their nods of approval. This is followed by the second character announcing he is a big fan of airplanes, while sitting in a book-filled study, wearing glasses, and fixing a model airplane. In the following scene, he smiles as he uses a professional camera to take pictures of planes passing overhead. This opening not only introduces the two characters' hobbies, but also conveys that they are academically high-achieving students. The scenery of their homes, which appear spacious and well-furnished, suggest middle-class status in the Hong Kong context. The Western cuisine, well-equipped modern kitchen, book-filled study, and expensive-looking professional camera featured in the video reinforce this middle-class identity.

This messaging can be understood on two levels. On one level, it challenges the biases of the dominant value system that dictate those with the means and ability to do otherwise should not choose VPET. On this level it challenges the dominant value system. On another level, it suggests that VPET is worthwhile *via* the fact that middle class, academically high-achieving students choose it. This discursive strategy is more contradictory. A close examination of the Task Force's suggested messaging reveals the hegemonic assumptions contained within the message construction. The statement "students pursuing VPET are not inferior to those following the traditional academic route" is supported by the following statement that "VPET students may also have the ability to pursue traditional academic education" (Task Force, 2015, p. 88). In other words, "not inferior" is interpreted as "also have the ability to pursue traditional academic education." The value markers for inferiority or superiority in this formulation remain those of the hegemonic framework, where academic education is considered the fundamental benchmark, and is therefore used as the measuring stick against which inferiority or superiority is measured.

To illuminate the problems with this discursive strategy, and the biases inherent within it, it helps to remember that one of the strengths of vocational education is precisely that it offers *diverse* models of education. In other words, it may offer models of education that may suit people who have different sets of strengths from those most valued by the academic education model. Valuing

vocational education is also about valuing the diversity of valuable skills, other than academic ones, which include, for example, manual occupation skills that may involve more complexity and different intelligences than academically trained social elites are inclined to recognize. By immediately resorting to the assertion that VPET students can also be academically strong, in order to demonstrate that they are not inferior, we fall into the trap of placing academic skills before all others in assessing worth. A different approach to demonstrating that VPET students are not inferior, which does not fall into this trap, might be to demonstrate complex and important tasks that VPET students accomplish—things that academic education may not prepare us for.

A similar critique can be mounted against the attempt to portray a more respectable image of VPET by using middle class students as the protagonists. As previously established, VPET continues to disproportionately serve a more disadvantaged student population than academic university education. The choice to *not* portray more disadvantaged students in this video is an absence which reinforces the dominant power structure of society, where more disadvantaged classes have less voice and fewer chances to demonstrate their talent or value. Instead of portraying middle class students to create an image of respectability, the video might have instead used the opportunity to portray the talent, pride, and fulfillment of working-class students as they pursue VPET, portraying their positive choice of VPET as a fulfilling option that develops their talents rather than a negative choice that they are consigned to due to lack of other options.

Similar to the messaging around the first theme of “promising careers,” these two messages about the academic ability and middle-class status of VPET students attempt to challenge class *associations* rather than class *biases*. They attempt to dilute the association of VPET with working class students or students who may not excel in traditional education, rather than asserting that these students are also excellent, just in different ways.

Theme 5: VPET is quality education

One final implicit theme of the publicity campaign videos concerns the portrayal of the VPET learning process. These scenes attempt to portray the quality of its education. What is notable about these portrayals is that on the one hand they include much hands-on learning, but on the other hand, they invoke many forms and symbols of academic education.

Two video segments that deal with the VPET learning process are the second segments of API 2 and API 3. The second segment of API 2 portrays the two characters' learning experiences. The culinary student takes notes while watching an instructor cook and then cooks while an older chef instructs her. The aircraft student takes notes both in a classroom lecture and while watching a teacher demonstrate an object. Meanwhile, the narration states that VPET programs are recognized under the Qualifications Framework. The second segment of API 3 portrays the learning experiences across a diversity of VPET programs. It portrays four different VPET programs: culinary arts, healthcare, fashion design, and engineering. In nine different scenes of teaching and learning, one takes place in a lecture setting, while the others show different forms of hands-on learning. Seven of these nine scenes feature a student learning from or being guided by an instructor, while only one features a student working on his own and one shows students working with peers. The accompanying narration stresses "a wide range of occupations," "programs up to the degree level," and "practical training." The videos feature repeated symbolism of glasses and diplomas and repeated scenes of teacher guidance.

In these scenes, the portrayals of hands-on learning and diverse learning options play to VPET's unique strengths. However, the stress on qualifications, articulation opportunities, and the portrayals of guidance by teacher expertise all play to more mainstream notions of what quality education looks like that come from academic education. The symbolism of glasses and diplomas plays to similar cultural understandings. While this refers to deeply ingrained cultural ideas about what good education looks like, and may reflect real teaching practices, it is also possible to envision alternatives that stress the difference of vocational education from academic education as one of its

strengths. For example, student-led learning and group learning through practice are different ways of envisioning quality learning, and book-learning, as symbolized by glasses, should not be necessary to signify quality education. The portrayal of the education process both challenges some cultural understandings of what good education looks like but also appeals to similarities to academic education as a way to assert legitimacy.

Discussion: Reinforcing or challenging the mechanisms of class stratification

In the process of changing existing discourses, while some elements are rewritten, there is a tendency for other unexamined assumptions to be reproduced, reinforcing their underlying power and possibly undermining efforts toward change. The five major themes found in the videos can be grouped into two basic approaches: one of asserting the potential for personal fulfillment and “a better fit” through diverse learning and career options in vocational education, and one drawing an association between VPET and high social status. The former strategy allows VPET to stand on its own merits, including its diversity, its different style of hands-on teaching, and the many options it offers to correspond with different strengths and interests. It points to the value of VPET in a way that goes beyond the question of its esteem in the current social hierarchy. The latter strategy, however, in the process of challenging the “low end” image of vocational education, falls into the trap of accepting the dominant social hierarchy of occupations and of classes. It reinforces the equation of “middle class” and “high class” with “respectable” and of “academically high achieving” with “superior.” Parts of the messaging also rely on and reinforce the image of mental labor as more respectable. Given the understanding that VPET’s lack of social respect is to a large extent a product of the class divide and class biases, these tactics reinforce rather than challenging the dominant social prejudices that contribute to VPET’s low respect. As Stalder et al. (2022) point out, even while VET may evolve to serve a wider range of occupations, many of the occupations it currently serve sit

lower on the hierarchy of occupations. It will be difficult to truly change the status of VET without also challenging the low social respect given to these occupations (Billett, 2020).

Scholarship examining the problems of VPET-related reforms in other regions has pointed to the problems that arise with uncritical acceptance of hegemonic ideas representing the prejudices of the socially dominant class, when they attempt to reform a sector that primarily serves a population that, in Billett's (2011) words, is "other" to them. In more straight-forward terms, given the academic pedigrees of most political elites, policymaking is often conducted by a class which is not itself served by VPET, and which brings its own assumptions to the process rather than understanding the value and problems of VPET from the inside (Relly, 2021; 2022). This can result in problematic policymaking that reinforces existing class biases rather than ameliorating them.

One of the ways in which this has been observed to happen is through an elite focus that, while trying to reduce the class divide *between* academic and vocational education, instead recreates that class divide *within* the VET sector. Atkins and Flint (2015) point out that the attempt to make VET elite and modern has led to stress on a few elite VET institutions. This may raise the esteem of a few programs but seems unlikely to change the reputation of the majority of lower level programs that mostly serve working class youth. Similarly, a critical analysis of China's national skills policy argues that the Chinese government's initiatives to upgrade VET credentials and invest in "model" vocational schools reinforces the credential-driven hegemony and excludes "non-model" vocational schools and marginalized learners (Wang, 2023). While the attempt to portray vocational education as up-to-date, modern, and high-tech has created pockets of vocational education that garner respect, this reputation does not transfer to the entire sector and has instead led to a class divide *within* vocational education. In contexts where reforms were not driven by those whom VET primarily serves, with a view to addressing their needs, reforms sometimes created an elite form of VET, while leaving most VET students behind (Billett, 2011). The elite bias manifested in Hong Kong's publicity campaign suggests the need to be on guard against focusing on exemplars while leaving

behind the bulk of students that VPET serves. The findings that the rebranding was poorly received by lower income families, who are VET's traditional constituency and who actually slightly preferred the old name, suggest further reason to beware of this potential problem (Lee et al., 2022).

Another problem that scholars have found to arise from the acceptance of hegemonic logics within VET reform is the tendency to overemphasize standardized credentials that many see as inappropriate for VET (Billett, 2014; Deissinger, 2022; Wang, 2023; Wheelahan et al., 2022). Scholars have pointed out that this tries to measure vocational education according to academic education's standards, in a way that almost guarantees it will come up short (Billett, 2014; Relly, 2021). Billett (2014, 2020) questions the ranking of occupations in Qualification Frameworks, which are based on acceptance of current hierarchies of work and the assumption that these hierarchies correspond to complexity of knowledge. Relly (2021) notes that a similar logic has led to a focus in UK VET reform on articulation opportunities rather than the intrinsic value of the knowledge and skills gained through VET. This reinforces the message that higher credentials are what is important, when academic education continues to sit at the top of the credential hierarchy. Wheelahan et al. (2022) note that this credential-focused logic tends to decontextualize and fetishize vocational skill, seeing it as abstract qualification-denominated units rather than specific context-embedded abilities, which are best developed or applied in strong relationship with the occupations and social contexts they serve. This mode of thinking obstructs recognition of the interdependence of skill development with other social systems and stymies its development (Wheelahan et al, 2022). As Billett (2014) points out, credential systems are drawn from academic education and grounded in an academic vision of school-based sequential studies, which are in many ways not suited to the range and diversity of vocational education. They also tend to be based on hierarchies of work and reinforce these classed hierarchies rather than challenging them (Billett, 2014; Stalder et al., 2022). The acceptance of these hierarchies and standards from academic education can reinforce the very prejudices that contribute to VPET's low status. In other words, when vocational education is

compared to academic education on academic education's terms, this all but ensures an unfavorable comparison (Billett et al., 2020). This serves as a reminder to be cautious about overemphasizing articulation or qualification levels and to place greater focus on the diverse inherent values of vocational education.

To summarize, the Hong Kong government's campaign to shift the image of vocational education attempts to both establish a new basis for its value in terms of personal fulfillment and to challenge the association of vocational education with a less socially privileged class.

The first strategy establishes a new basis for valuing VPET that breaks out of dominant logics of social hierarchy. This is an important basis for challenging both the poor valuation of VPET and the occupational and class hierarchies of respect that are the foundation of this problem. Centering the inherent values of VPET—including but not limited to its hands-on learning, its wide variety of options, and its close connections to the world of work—is a good way to start seeing not just vocational education but education as a whole in a new light.

The second strategy is more problematic. Through the suggestion that VPET is not limited to lower class jobs or lower-class students, it challenges a problematic stereotype. However, it also applies the troubled strategy of trying to improve the image of VPET by associating it with the status symbols of the existing class hierarchy (e.g., academic achievement, white collar professionalism). This discursive strategy accepts and reinforces existing class biases. It also fails to center the voices of those people whom we should be more concerned about if we approach the question of VPET's status from the perspective of confronting social injustices: the more disadvantaged students who are disproportionately served by VPET (Lee, 2016). Rather than highlighting cases seen as "successful" or "respectable" according to the dominant logic of social status, a campaign to promote VPET could instead portray the dignity and diverse forms of talent of the average student served by VPET or inspiring stories from across the diverse range of its student population.

Insights for future VPET promotion campaigns

It might be asked then, in what other ways could the value of vocational education be conceived? One of the strategies in Hong Kong's VPET rebranding campaign already takes a step in this direction, by reconceiving the value of VPET in terms of personal fulfillment and choice, the same values that Dewey perceived in vocational education (Billett, 2011). Studies suggest that these are things that VPET students also value in their education. In one UK-based study, students reported that while they were aware their credentials had low social esteem, they valued their exposure to the real world of work and felt that their vocational courses were "the right course for me" (Atkins *et al.*, 2011). They also reported seeking many things from their careers beyond income or social status. These included independence, confidence, and enjoyment (Atkins *et al.*, 2011). Billett (2011) further points to the possibility of valuing occupations in terms of their social contributions, citing an example of a lawyer who left her profession to become a nurse, after seeing nurses care for her dying parents and deciding that their work was more important. The CareersNZ (2020) VPET promotional video utilizes this logic when it portrays vocational education graduates working in many essential worker roles. López-Fogués (2012), meanwhile, proposes a re-imagining of vocational education's value based on Amartya Sen's human capabilities approach. This perspective shifts the focus from the economic outcomes that education generates to the freedoms and potentials it opens up. Much aligned with Dewey's views, it sees the value of education in its ability to both help people develop the agency to make their own choices and help them develop the abilities to achieve whatever those choices entail (López-Fogués, 2012). Such an alternative rubric, which measures value in terms of personal agency and fulfillment rather than social status or economic returns, offers an alternative basis on which to promote vocational education that does not discursively reinforce dominant social hierarchies.

Measuring vocational education against traditional measures of economic success or occupational status is likely to reinforce traditional hierarchies rather than challenging them (Relly,

2021; Stalder et al., 2022). These differences should not be ignored or denied but should instead be questioned. There are diverse and complex factors, beyond income or achieving an elite job, that may make vocational education a valuable experience for students. VPET may offer flexible opportunities for people in a particular life situation. It may train people for jobs that give back to the community, or it may suit particular learning style preferences and build up a student's confidence as a result. Many less prestigious occupations and the vocational education corresponding to them involve skills that may be no less difficult or important than those of more prestigious occupations, but are simply less recognized because of the value systems that dominate (Billett et al., 2020). For example, feminists have pointed to the undervaluing of care labor due to its designation as women's labor and the invisibility of its economic value due to its privatization within the home. Manual labor occupations are also often stereotyped as less challenging. This stereotype is likely related to power structures wherein people without detailed personal knowledge of manual labor crafts dominate positions of social power and voice (Billett, 2020). As Billett (2014) suggests, the voice of those closest to vocational education—its students and teachers—is a good place to start to think about the value of vocational education. While it is important to challenge stereotypes about VPET's income potential and job opportunities, there are many other diverse reasons to choose VPET which will only become apparent when we dive into the complexity of students' lives and experiences.

In light of these observations, the government could consider reframing their messaging in terms of the diverse values and experiences of VPET students. Questioning what a “promising” career looks like to focus on a “meaningful” career could provide an alternative perspective. Highlighting the values that VPET students themselves see in their education, such as independence and autonomy, provides alternative discourses that can better challenge hegemonic ideas. Emphasizing the differences of VPET from traditional academic education, such as its diverse learning modes, could serve to highlight its *unique* value. Most importantly, campaigns to change the perception of vocational education should be aware of the fact that this is embedded in a broader set

of class biases, where outsiders speaking “for” the beneficiaries of VPET are liable to reinforce these. Thus, to raise the status of VPET, we should begin by empowering its constituents to speak for themselves. Students’ stories should be highlighted, including the typical student and the wide range of diverse students, rather than just the “exemplary” student. Students’ voices about their learning journeys as well as their experiences of campus life and work attachment should be given pride of place in future publicity.

Limitations and future studies

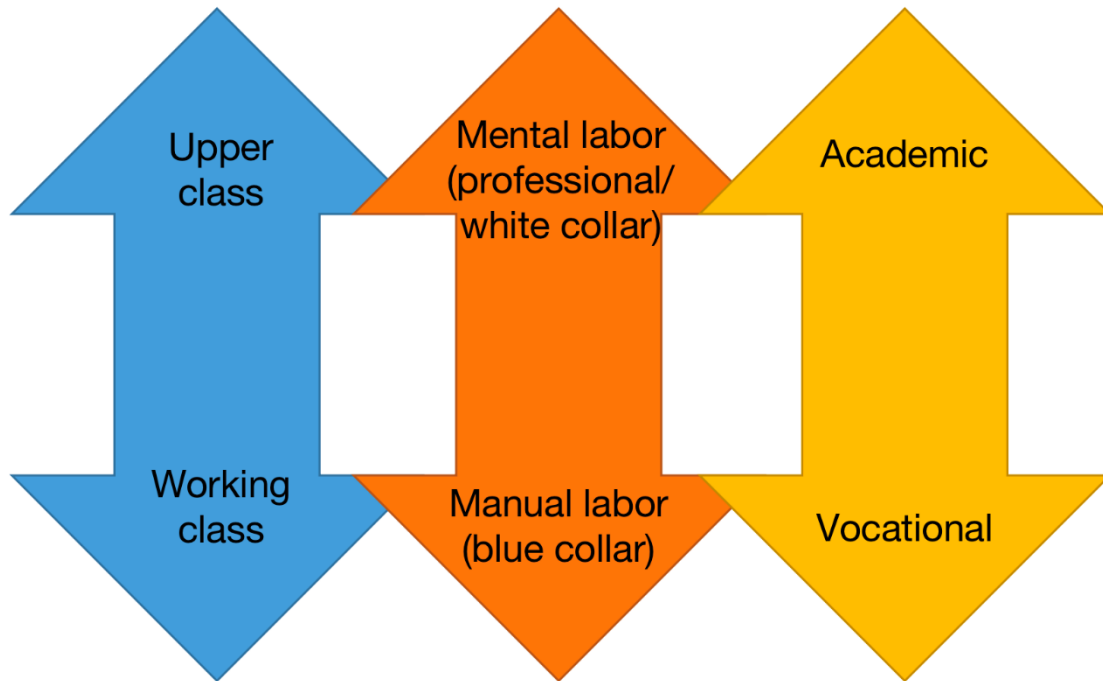
It must be noted that the APIs analysed in this study represent only a portion of the discourse that has been produced as part of efforts to revamp the image of vocational education. They may not comprehensively reflect other nuances of messaging. However, as public service announcements are widely disseminated on Hong Kong television, they constitute an important part of the rebranding campaign and send cues about its logic and assumptions. Another limitation of this study is that it has investigated only government messaging, but does not investigate the discourse of VET providers and discourse in popular media such as news. Discourse analysis also does not provide information about audience perceptions and interpretations. A fruitful direction for future studies might be to examine the discourse among VPET students about vocational education and how their conceptions of vocational education have been affected by government publicity efforts.

Table 1. Major themes of APIs and how they challenge/reinforce dominant discourse

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Challenges to dominant discourse</i>	<i>Use/reinforcement of dominant discourse</i>
VPET provides a “promising future”	Central theme of API 1, portrayed through high-class work settings, business cards and suits, and working with white customers/supervisors	Challenges associations of VPET with “low end” occupations	Uses dominant discourse of understanding “promising” in terms of current hierarchies of social status, e.g. suits, high-class settings
VPET is a chance to develop your interests and follow your passion	Central theme of API 2, portrayed as developing enjoyable careers based on interests through VPET; important theme of API 3 on choosing own path and not following others	Challenges tendencies to value VPET in terms of social status and others’ views, stresses instead value based on personal fulfillment	
VPET is suitable for students with strong academic ability	Symbolism of diploma, glasses, academic awards, and book-filled study (API 2)	Challenges image of VPET students as academically weak students; challenges idea that those with the grades should pursue academic education	Based on assumption of academic achievement as key measure of talent, rather than establishing different discourse of talent
VPET is suitable for middle-class students	Middle class home surroundings (API 2)	Challenges class biases among better off families that VPET is not for them	Reliance on assumption of middle-class respectability to portray VPET in positive light
VPET is quality education	Hands-on learning, supervision by teachers, repeated use of symbols such as diplomas, glasses, stress on qualifications and articulation (API 2 & 3)	Positive portrayals of alternate hands-on models of learning	Symbolism from academic education to convey legitimacy;

Source: Table created by authors

Figure 1. The parallel hierarchies which are mutually reinforcing with the hierarchy of academic over vocational



Source: Figure created by authors

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