



## Intercultural Communicative Competence of Thai Crew Members for International Cruise Lines<sup>\*</sup>

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Since cruise tourism is a global business, cruise crew members need to possess strong English proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. However, studies on Thai cruise crew members and their intercultural communication are underexplored. This study investigated Thai cruise crew members' intercultural communication backgrounds and their intercultural communicative competence. The data was collected from an online survey conducted between November 2020 and March 2021 from 433 Thai cruise crew members. It was found that they learned about intercultural communication at work or through their private life. They were equipped with a high level of overall intercultural communicative competence, with the strongest attributes in skill, attitude, action, and knowledge and understanding in descending order. This study suggests implications for educational institutions nationwide to prepare their graduates to be effective communicators by incorporating intercultural communication in their mandatory English language courses. Additionally, this study serves as a guideline for the Thai government and private sectors to develop intercultural communicative competence of current and future Thai cruise crew members.

### Research Article

### Abstract

### Keywords

intercultural communicative  
competence;  
cruise crew members;  
cruise tourism

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## ทักษะความสามารถด้านการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ของลูกเรือชาวไทยประจำเรือสำราญระหว่างประเทศ\*

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การท่องเที่ยวเรือสำราญถือเป็นธุรกิจระดับนานาชาติ ภาษาอังกฤษ และทักษะความสามารถด้านการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมที่มีประสิทธิภาพจึงเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นสำหรับลูกเรือ ในปัจจุบันยังไม่มีงานศึกษาวิจัยของประเทศไทย ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของลูกเรือสำราญ ดังนั้นงานวิจัยนี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาที่มาของการเรียนรู้และระดับทักษะความสามารถด้านการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ผู้วิจัยใช้แบบสอบถามออนไลน์เป็นเครื่องมือในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลระหว่างเดือนพฤศจิกายน 2563 ถึงเดือนมีนาคม 2564 จากกลุ่มตัวอย่างลูกเรือชาวไทยจำนวน 433 คน ผลการศึกษาพบว่าลูกเรือสำราญชาวไทยเรียนรู้เกี่ยวกับการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมจากการทำงานและจากการใช้ชีวิตประจำวัน อีกทั้งลูกเรือสำราญชาวไทยยังมีทักษะความสามารถด้านการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมในระดับสูง เมื่อพิจารณาปัจจัยประกอบแต่ละด้านพบว่า ด้านทักษะมีคะแนนสูงที่สุด รองลงมาคือด้านทัศนคติ ด้านการนำไปปฏิบัติ และด้านความรู้ความเข้าใจ ตามลำดับ ผลการวิจัยนี้สามารถใช้เป็นแนวทางให้แก่สถานศึกษาในประเทศไทย โดยการสอดแทรกเนื้อหาเกี่ยวกับการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษภาคบังคับ อีกทั้งยังสามารถใช้เป็นแนวทางให้กับหน่วยงานภาครัฐและเอกชนในการจัดอบรมเพื่อส่งเสริมทักษะความสามารถด้านการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของลูกเรือสำราญชาวไทยในปัจจุบันและอนาคต

### บทความวิจัย

### บทคัดย่อ

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## 1. Introduction

Effective communication is essential in the globalized era of technological and cultural diversities where people of different backgrounds are interconnected. Since language is a part of culture, they are inseparable (Byram, 1997). Not only are people required to master the macro skills in another language, but they also need to understand the non-language traits, notably those concerning cultures when they communicate interculturally. By doing so, language users can overcome language and cultural barriers when they communicate in multicultural surroundings (Agar, 2006). As English is a global language, it is used as a medium to communicate across borders in myriad businesses including hospitality. It has become a requirement for people in the tourism industry to be proficient in English (Crystal, 2003). When language abilities with intercultural communication are combined, people are able to understand one another with empathy and avoid unnecessary conflicts due to cultural miscommunication (Deardorff, 2009).

As cruise tourism is one of the fastest growing businesses in the tourism industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of cruise passengers worldwide was predicted to reach 32 million in 2020 and beyond (Sun et al., 2011). Consequently, the number of cruise ships has increased to serve the growing demand. The number of job opportunities therefore has increased globally to facilitate the escalating number of cruise passengers. Although the growth in the cruise industry was suspended in 2020 and early 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cruise industry is expected to resume its business in the fourth quarter of 2021 and regain its prosperity in 2022 and beyond by implementing strict safety procedures to elevate onboard hygiene (CLIA, 2020). Due to the promising growth in cruise tourism, the Thai government has announced its 12<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021) to foster cruise businesses by improving not only infrastructure and human resources at the three ports of call in Thailand, but also Thai workforce on international cruise ships (Thangthong & Khuanmuang, 2020).

In order to become cruise crew members, non-native English speakers - including Thai nationals - need to pass the Marlins Test, which is an internationally standardized English test for offshore workers. The test focuses on measuring the level of general conversational English needed for cruise ship staff members (Thangthong, 2011). However, since effective communication can be achieved by having both strong English proficiency and intercultural communication skills, many business owners prefer hiring workers who possess both qualities to provide services to international customers (Nomnian, 2014). Furthermore, it is essential for workers in the tourism industry, including cruise crew members, to be able to communicate in English while being aware of cultural differences so as to interact with passengers and colleagues and perform their duties effectively in a multicultural and multilingual atmosphere (Grobella, 2015). Moreover, their interaction with passengers can determine the attainment of memorable experiences during the passengers' trip (Kim et al., 2012). As a result, workers in the

tourism industry need to be equipped with effective English language proficiency and strong intercultural communicative competence (Thurlow & Jarwoski, 2010).

During the recent past decades, intercultural communication has gained popularity among scholars in the fields of applied linguistics, English communication, and hospitality (Deardorff, 2006; Gibson & Zhong, 2005). However, most scholars placed an emphasis on intercultural communication pedagogy including curriculum development and student and teacher education (Hsu et al., 2017). To name a few, King and Bailey (2021) studied intercultural communication of international students in higher education in the U.S., Mikkonen et al. (2020) investigated teachers' intercultural communicative competence experiences whilst mentoring nursing students in Finland, and Ou and Gu (2020) explored how international and Chinese students used their intercultural communication to communicate. Since these studies were heavily education-focused, current intercultural communication studies in professional contexts are considered insufficient (Inkaew, 2016).

In Thailand, although there is a larger number of intercultural communication studies today compared to those in past decades, many of them also focused on intercultural communication in pedagogical settings, notably Phongsirikul and Thongrin (2019) who explored students' attitudes toward their intercultural learning experience in English classes, Wattanavorakijkul (2020) who measured intercultural sensitivity of Thai university students participating in work and travel programs in the U.S., and Nomnian and Jhaiyanuntana (2020) who investigated intercultural communication challenges and strategies of Thai undergraduate hotel interns. However, when it comes to intercultural communication in workplaces, there has been merely a limited number of studies in Thailand. Inkaew (2016) analyzed the level of intercultural communicative competence among hotel front office staff members in Thailand. Anantamongkolkul et al. (2019) investigated how local Thais used their intercultural competence to accommodate the needs of long-stay foreign tourists. Semchuchot et al. (2021) studied intercultural sensitivity of Thai flight attendants when conversing with Muslim passengers. Thus, studies on intercultural communication in professional contexts are underexplored.

The literature review of studies in Thailand showed merely a limited number of research on cruise crew members. Many of them highlighted cruise passengers' behaviors and ports of call development (Thangthong, 2011; 2016; 2017; Cheewatrangoongit et al., 2018; Esichaikul et al., 2019; Thangthong et al., 2019; Thangthong & Khuanmuang, 2020). However, none of them investigated cruise crew members' intercultural communicative competence. Since cruise crew members are considered the front line of a company, they have direct contact with cruise passengers from various cultural backgrounds. Therefore, their intercultural communicative competence is worth investigating.

The objectives of this study were (1) to investigate the background of Thai cruise crew members' intercultural communicative competence, and (2) to examine the level of intercultural communicative competence of Thai cruise crew members. This study contributes implications for current and future cruise crew members from Thailand to reflect and prepare themselves for a culturally diverse working

environment. Furthermore, the results of this study may serve as a guideline for cruise line recruitment agencies, educators, and stakeholders in Thailand in designing effective training courses.

## **2. Literature review**

Globalization has caused intercultural flows where people of diverse backgrounds interact and exchange their thoughts and experiences across borders (Appadurai, 1996). Such a phenomenon has triggered workers in a myriad of businesses, notably those in the tourism industry, to be equipped with strong English language proficiency and solid intercultural communicative competence. Since crew cruise members are required to stay on board a cruise ship throughout their 6-10-month contract, they must interact with both passengers and colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds both in their professional and private lives (Thangthong, 2011; 2016; 2017). As a result, many scholars in the fields of education and tourism suggested that educational and professional institutions should prepare their graduates and employees to be equipped with strong intercultural communication skills which are necessary when they communicate in English or in a foreign language with people from multiple cultural backgrounds (ThurLOW & Jarwoski, 2010).

### **2.1 Intercultural communicative competence assessments**

Although several intercultural competence models have been widely used in the domain of intercultural communication studies, the author found that the following six models are deemed relevant for this study.

The first model is Intercultural Sensitivity Model (Bennett, 1993) which highlights how people develop their intercultural communicative competence through their attitudes, skills, and knowledge as they progress through their ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages. The second model is Intercultural Competence Model (Byram, 1997) which includes the level of intercultural competence of six domains - attitudes, knowledge, discovery skills, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and discourse. The third one is Intercultural Maturity Model (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005) which underlines the integration of three dimensions of development - cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. The fourth one is the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2009) which represents three components - motivation, cognition, and desired internal outcome. The fifth model is the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (Council of Europe, 2009). This model emphasizes adult interaction and intercultural communication of knowledge and skills, behaviors, attitudes and feelings, and actions. The last one is Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013) and focuses on self-development of intercultural communicative

competence through education and encompasses four areas - attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions.

After considering the different components of each model, the author chose Intercultural Components (Barrett et al., 2013) as the suitable model for this study based on the fact that it is the only model to deal with action as well as knowledge and understanding. These two components are essential for professional workers, especially those directly coping with international customers. Additionally, this model is also composed of attitudes and skills. These two components are vital since attitude is a foundation of the other three components. When people possess a high level of intercultural appropriate attitudes, they tend to excel in the other three components. Furthermore, once people are intercultural skillful, they appear to be able to utilize their knowledge efficiently and act appropriately. As cruise crew members regularly communicate with passengers and colleagues of diverse cultures, their actions caused by their attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills are important in order to perform their duties and live with other coworkers harmoniously and empathically (Byram, 2008).

## 2.2 Intercultural component model

Developed by Barrett et al. (2013), Intercultural Component Model serves as a guideline to promote intercultural communication amongst people who need to communicate in multicultural settings. This model is comprised of four intercultural competence domains - attitude, knowledge and understanding, skill, and action. Importantly, Barrett et al. (2013) further suggested that the most important component may be action. This is because the other three components would not become fruitful if people do not act. In other words, many people tend to possess attitude, knowledge and understanding, and skill as intercultural communicators. However, they may hesitate to act and perform intercultural. Therefore, all four components need to be deployed and put into practice via actions whenever people encounter intercultural situations (Barrett et al., 2013). The importance of action has also been confirmed by the Council of Europe (2009) who included action as a crucial component to achieve a strong degree of intercultural communication competence. The research framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

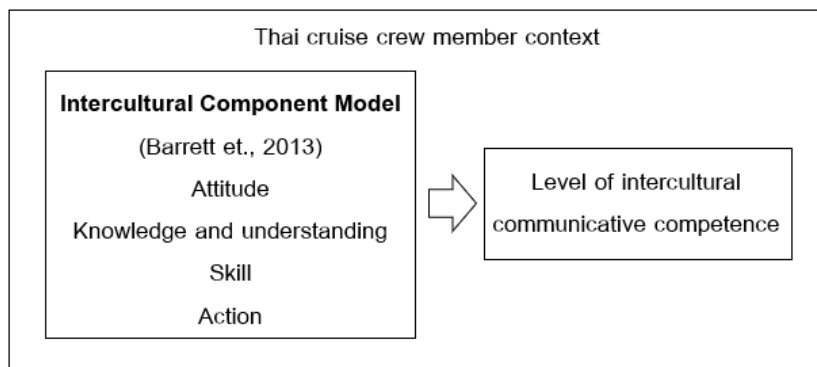


Figure 1. Research framework of the study

### 2.2.1 Attitude

The first domain is attitude. People with strong intercultural attitude glorify diversity of cultures, viewpoints, and social practices. They respect those with different cultural attributes. Besides, not only are they broad minded and willing to learn about new cultures, but they are also enthusiastic to learn about unfamiliar cultures both by themselves and from people of different backgrounds. Additionally, people with strong intercultural attitude interact with those of different cultures with empathy. They normalize differences in cultures and admire the multiplicity of cultures. Furthermore, they are calm and patient when encountering ambiguous or surprising social practices they are unaware of or unfamiliar with. They are also eager to find opportunities to participate in activities and practices with people from different viewpoints or cultural orientations (Barrett et al., 2013). The importance of attitude is also confirmed by Bennett (1993) who viewed attitude as a fundamental element to develop intercultural communication. Furthermore, Byram (1997) included attitude as the first component to identify the degree of acquiring intercultural competence.

When using the objective-based approach (Byram, 1997), the five objectives to measure the level of attitude are to assess Thai cruise crew members' attitude (1) in glorifying diversity of cultures, viewpoints, and social practices; (2) in respecting those with different cultural attributes; (3) towards broad-mindedness, curiosity, and willingness to learn about new cultures; (4) in tolerating practices which seem ambiguous and inconsistent in different cultures; and (5) in finding opportunities to participate in activities and practices with people from different cultures.

### 2.2.2 Knowledge and understanding

The second domain is knowledge and understanding. People with strong knowledge and understanding of other cultures attempt to understand the authenticity of different cultures. They also understand and are aware of various ways people may perceive their own or other cultures (Barrett et al., 2013). Despite knowing and understanding that other people may prejudice, stereotype, and discriminate, they do not do so. However, they forgive and do not judge or stereotype others in return

(Byram, 1997). In addition, they understand that the way they express their ideas with their own or other languages may affect other people of another culture differently. This is because every language is unique in its own ways in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication. People from different cultures may express their ideas in various ways to convey the same message. For example, what is funny in one culture may not be so in another culture. On top of that, people with strong knowledge and understanding of other cultures know that people from different cultural orientations may have their own verbal communication, gestures, and paralanguage to convey their thoughts. Therefore, they accept and do not feel threatened by different ways people of different cultures express their ideas (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). What's more, they know that people of different cultural orientations may have their own ways of beliefs and practices. People may worship or carry out social practices according to the way they believe. Although these may not make sense or seem unusual or even unacceptable to some cultures, these practices are sensible in their own culture – both at individual and social levels. As a result, they respect personal beliefs and practices of people from other cultures (Bennett, 1993).

When using the objective-based approach (Byram, 1997), the five objectives to measure the level of knowledge and understand are to assess Thai cruise crew members' knowledge and understanding (1) about the authenticity of different cultures; (2) about the awareness of various ways people may perceive their own or other cultures; (3) that the way people express their ideas with their own or other languages may affect other people of another culture differently; (4) that people from different cultural orientations may have their own verbal communication, gestures, and paralanguage to convey their thoughts; and (5) that people of different cultural orientations may have their own ways of beliefs and practices.

### 2.2.3 Skill

The third domain is skill. People who are skillful in coping with intercultural exchanges are able to decentralize their ego. Put simply, they are open minded to listen to and consider other people's viewpoints. Their mastery in finding, interpreting, and synthesizing information about their own and other cultures - including social values, norms, beliefs, and practices - is also exceptional (Council of Europe 2009). They show empathy when interacting with people of diverse cultures. Furthermore, interculturally skillful people are flexible and critical thinkers. Their fluidity in terms of cognitive ability is superb. In other words, they are creative and sensible, and are able to interrelate different thoughts and information with ease. On top of that, these people are adaptable when they encounter intercultural situations. For instance, they excel in manipulating verbal and non-verbal communication which is deemed acceptable in their own cultures, but may be considered unacceptable in some other cultures (Bennett, 1993). What's more, intercultural experts tend to be multilingual. They can code-mix or code-switch languages to avoid any language barriers or communication fallacy. Lastly, these people are language and culture



mediators. They often help people of different languages and cultures with translation, interpretation, and clarification (Barrett et al., 2013).

When using the objective-based approach (Byram, 1997), five objectives to measure the level of skill are to assess Thai cruise crew members' skill (1) in coping with intercultural exchanges by decentralizing their ego; (2) in finding information about their own and other cultures; (3) in interpreting and synthesizing information about their own and other cultures; (4) in adapting themselves when they encounter intercultural situations; and (5) as mediators during intercultural situations.

#### 2.3.4 Action

The last domain is action. People who are good at acting interculturally are active in finding opportunities to engage with people from other cultures. They also act appropriately and respectfully according to the culture of people they are interacting or engaging with. Moreover, they cooperate with people with different viewpoints, beliefs, or practices on shared activities by discussing and arriving at common viewpoints. Furthermore, they are unafraid and eager to defend others from criticism, skepticism, derision, and discrimination so as to protect their dignity and equality as human beings regardless of culture, language, race, and religion. Such a notion goes hand in hand with the Council of Europe's (2009) definition of action as the ability to get involved with other people in making things different and better. They also radiate positivity to people around them, and encourage others to be respectful towards those from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, they act as mediators when encountering sensitive or difficult intercultural situations (Barrett et al., 2013).

When using the objective-based approach (Byram, 1997), the five objectives to measure the level of action are to assess Thai cruise crew members' action (1) in finding opportunities to engage with people from other cultures; (2) in appropriately and respectfully interacting according to the culture of people they are interacting with; (3) in cooperating with people with different viewpoints, beliefs, or practices on shared activities by discussing and arriving at common viewpoints; (4) in defending people of different cultures from criticism, skepticism, derision, and discrimination; and (5) in mediating when they encounter sensitive or difficult intercultural situations.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The population in this study was Thai cruise crew members on international cruise lines who have been working in service-related positions under contract to three licensed cruise line agencies in Thailand. Since the exact population of the cruise line workers under contract to all agencies was

unknown, at least 400 respondents were required to ensure the 95 percent reliability of the findings based on Cochran's sample size formula (Cochran, 1977). Nonetheless, there were 433 random respondents participated in this study. The respondents worked in different service-related positions - namely 151 (34.87%) servers, 117 (27.02%) stateroom attendants, 74 (17.09%) chefs, 43 (9.93%) bartenders, 34 (7.85%) casino attendants, and 14 (3.23%) porters.

### 3.2 Instruments

After reviewing the literature, the author selected the Intercultural Competent Model (Barrett et al., 2013) as the most suitable framework to assess the level of intercultural communicative competence. However, some modifications were made for use in the Thai cruise crew member context. The adaptation of each questionnaire item was conducted by using the grounded data from pilot interviews with 10 Thai cruise crew members. This process allowed the author to gain insights into how cruise crew members perform their duties and live their daily life on board a cruise ship. The question items were then presented with various intercultural situations in accordance with the Thai cruise crew member context. This was implemented in order to elicit the respondents' subconscious level of intercultural communicative competence based on the objective-based approach (Byram, 1997).

Once the adapted version of the questionnaire had been completed, each questionnaire item was validated by three cruise line service recruiting managers to ascertain suitable contents. The language used in the questionnaire was Thai in order to avoid possible language barriers. The Thai-version questionnaire was also proofread by two university instructors in the field of English-Thai translation to ensure language clarity and understandability.

Moreover, each domain of Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013) was calculated to test the reliability of scale as shown in Table 1. The reliability of the questionnaire was greater than 0.8, which was deemed a very good level. Therefore, the scale was considered acceptable (Ursachi, Horodnic & Zait, 2015).

Table 1 *Reliability of questionnaire*

Four domains of Intercultural Component Model	Questionnaire items	Cronbach's Alpha
1. Attitude	1-5	0.951
2. Knowledge and understanding	6-10	0.963
3. Skill	11-15	0.945
4. Action	16-20	0.921

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part contained 9 items of the respondents' demographic data and their background of intercultural communication. The background of intercultural communication was used to explain reasons why respondents possessed certain degree of intercultural competence. To explain, the data from this part helped justify whether the respondents learned about intercultural communication from formal instructions or through other acquisitions such as work and life experiences. The second part was comprised of 20 items to assess their level of intercultural communicative competence. There were 5-point Likert-type scales (Likert, 1932) from 1 to 5. They were 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (unsure), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). There were five of these attributes grouped under each of the four domains of the Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013) - attitudes (items 1-5), knowledge and understanding (items 6-10), skills (items 11-15), and actions (items 16-20). The third part was an open-ended question for the respondents to provide additional details.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Prior to data collection, this study was approved according to research ethics guidelines in July 2020. The data collection was then conducted between November 2020 and March 2021 at three cruise line agencies in Thailand by distributing online questionnaires to Thai crew members who have worked on international cruise ships under their contracts. With assistance from the human resources staff members from the three cruise crew member agencies in Thailand, the link to the online survey was e-mailed to random Thai employees whose duties involved providing services on board an international cruise ship.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The data from the first part of the survey was analyzed in terms of frequencies and percentages to find out the background of Thai cruise crew members' intercultural communicative competence.

The data from the second part of the survey was analyzed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. The results of the survey were computed in terms of means, and standard deviations to measure the respondents' levels of intercultural communicative competence. To interpret the data, criteria for levels of intercultural communicative competence were set up in five levels using the mean scores as follows: 1.00-1.80 = "very low," 1.81-2.60 = "low," 2.61-3.40 = "moderate," 3.41-4.20 = "high," and 4.21-5.00 = "very high."

The responses from the open-ended question were given in both Thai and English. Thus, the translation process was implemented. The data from this part was analyzed using content analysis to find out themes, which was used as qualitative data to support the quantitative data from the survey.

#### 4. Findings

The first part of the online survey included respondents' demographic data. It was found that there were 243 (56.12%) male respondents and 190 (43.88%) female respondents. Their ages were between 23 and 54 years. The majority, 214 (49.42%) respondents, had been with the company for 6-10 years. There were 138 (31.87%) respondents who had worked as cruise crew members from 1-5 years, and 81 (18.71%) of them had been on board a cruise ship for over 10 years. An interesting point of the findings was that the majority, 307 (70.90%) respondents, graduated from neither language nor tourism and hospitality backgrounds. Only 126 (29.10%) had a degree or diploma in related fields. All 433 (100%) had work experience in hotels and restaurants prior to becoming cruise crew members.

Interestingly, it was found that only 82 (18.94%) respondents had learned about intercultural communication when they were students, whereas the majority, 297 (68.59%) respondents, had not learned about it during their school years. What's more, 54 (12.47%) respondents were unsure whether they had learned about it at school. Additionally, the data showed that 358 (82.68%) learned about intercultural communication from their previous and current workplaces while 75 (17.32%) were unsure about it. Furthermore, 288 (66.51%) agreed that they had learned about intercultural communication through their life experience. However, 145 (33.49%) were unsure about it.

The second part of the online survey measured their level of intercultural communicative competence based on the four domains of the Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013) – attitude, knowledge and understanding, skill, and action. The findings are displayed as follows.

Table 2 *Level of overall intercultural communicative competence*

Domains	Means	S.D.	Interpretation
Attitude	3.90	0.89	High
Knowledge and understanding	3.86	0.91	High
Skill	4.06	0.85	High
Action	3.88	0.95	High
Overall	3.92	0.81	High

Table 2 illustrates that Thai cruise crew members' overall intercultural communicative competence was high. Also, they were highly competent in all the four domains, with the strongest level in their skill, attitude, action, and knowledge and understanding in descending order. When considering the attributes in each domain, the data showed that their competence ranged from moderate to very high. The objectives to assess their competence were retrieved from the definition of each attribute by Barrett et al. (2013) as presented in Tables 3-6.

Table 3 *Attitudes towards intercultural communicative competence*

Items	Statements	Means	S.D.	Interpretation
1	I believe it is normal for people from some cultures to provide services to male passengers before female passengers.	3.18	1.18	Moderate
2	I believe it is normal for the elderly to travel alone.	3.75	0.90	High
3	When I serve passengers who are from countries that I do not know, I always search for information about the cultures of those countries.	4.37	0.70	Very high
4	When I travel to countries where people eat with fingers, I think it is alright because it is their social practice.	4.28	0.76	Very high
5	I enjoy talking, working, and hanging around with foreigners more than with Thais.	3.94	0.93	High
Overall		3.90	0.89	High

The data in Table 3 reveals that Thai cruise crew members possessed a high level of intercultural communicative competence in terms of their attitude (mean score = 3.90). Their competence was ranked the highest in their attitude towards broad-mindedness, curiosity, and willingness to learn about new cultures. Also, the second highest attribute was their attitude to tolerate practices which seem ambiguous and inconsistent in different cultures. These two attributes received the mean scores of 4.37 and 4.28, respectively. This means Thai cruise crew members were very highly competent. However, Thai cruise crew members were moderately competent in their attitude in glorifying diversity of cultures, viewpoints, and social practices, with the mean score of 3.18.

Table 4 *Knowledge and understanding of intercultural communicative competence*

Items	Statements	Means	S.D.	Interpretation
6	I know that passengers from North America may be Asians and may not speak fluent English.	3.68	0.98	Moderate
7	I know that some foreigners do not share their food during a meal. So, when I eat with them, I will order individual dishes for each person.	3.93	0.95	High
8	I know that speaking English with Thai accent is unique, and I love listening to a variety of accents from non-native English speakers.	3.49	0.97	High

Items	Statements	Means	S.D.	Interpretation
9	I know that some foreigners may talk very loudly or use an aggressive tone of voice with one another during their general conversation.	3.86	0.88	High
10	I know that Jewish or Muslim passengers need special meals and special places to perform their rituals when they are aboard.	4.36	0.76	Very high
Overall		3.86	0.91	High

The findings in Table 4 showcase Thai cruise crew members' knowledge and understanding of intercultural communication. It was found that they had a high level of intercultural communication knowledge and understanding in general (mean score = 3.86). Their highest attribute (mean score = 4.36) was concerning their knowledge and understanding of people from different cultural orientations in terms of their beliefs and practices. The second highest attribute was their knowledge and understanding about the awareness of various ways people may perceive their own or other cultures, with a mean score of 3.93. By contrast, their knowledge and understanding about the authenticity of different cultures was moderate, with a mean score of 3.68.

Table 5 *Skills relating intercultural communicative competence*

Items	Statements	Means	S.D.	Interpretation
11	During a "Thai Night" party among colleagues, I do not complain when the sign says, "Thailand's Independence Day."	3.61	1.06	High
12	Crew members need to learn about universal and local cultures as much as possible, so that they can get along with others easily.	4.49	0.64	Very high
13	I will not touch some foreigners' head because they may think like many Thais that the head is the highest place in the body in terms of reverence.	4.24	0.81	Very high
14	When there is a foreigner nearby, I will not speak Thai with my Thai colleagues.	3.76	1.02	High
15	I like to help my colleagues when they have difficulties communicating with hearing-impaired passengers.	4.19	0.73	High
Overall		4.06	0.85	High

Table 5 displays Thai cruise crew members' level of intercultural communicative competence in terms of skills. It was found that their general skill regarding intercultural communication was high (mean

score = 4.06). The data also points out that their skill in finding information about their own and other cultures obtained the highest mean score of 4.49. The second highest mean score of 4.24 was concerning the skill in interpreting and synthesizing information about their own and other cultures. Conversely, their skill in coping with intercultural exchanges by decentralizing their ego received the lowest mean score of 3.61.

Table 6 *Actions with intercultural communicative competence*

Items	Statements	Means	S.D.	Interpretation
16	If possible, I always volunteer to serve passengers who have a disability.	4.16	0.76	High
17	I will not explain Thai culture to a passenger who bought a Buddha image from a gift shop and placed it on the floor.	3.26	1.18	Moderate
18	During a meal with European colleagues, I am more comfortable using a spoon to eat rice even though they use a fork.	3.51	1.11	High
19	I treat passengers with a disability the same way I treat other passengers.	4.39	0.69	Very high
20	I will not talk about sensitive topics with passengers from countries where there are political conflicts going on.	4.06	0.98	High
Overall		3.88	0.95	High

The data in Table 6 demonstrates that Thai cruise crew members possessed a high level of intercultural communicative competence in terms of their action (mean score = 3.88). Their action in defending people of different cultures from criticism, skepticism, derision, and discrimination received the highest mean score of 4.39 which was interpreted as very high. Additionally, the second highest attribute was their action in finding opportunities to engage with people from other cultures. This attribute received the mean score of 4.16 which was interpreted as high. However, Thai cruise crew members were moderately competent in their action in appropriately and respectfully interacting according to the culture of people they are interacting with. This attribute received the mean score of 3.26.

The third part of the online survey was an open-ended question for respondents to provide any additional information. There were 221 (51.03%) respondents who provided additional information. These responses were categorized into three themes as follows.

### **Theme 1: Importance of intercultural communication**

#### **Extract 1**

*Intercultural communication is vital for my job since I need to communicate with passengers and colleagues from many cultures.*

#### **Extract 2**

*Knowing about intercultural communication, I can communicate in English without causing unintentional misunderstandings or conflicts with others.*

#### **Extract 3**

*Since I have lived on board a cruise ship for 10 months – almost every year, my personal and professional lives are inevitably exposed to multicultural environments. Therefore, being equipped with intercultural communicative competence really helps me get along well with everyone aboard even though I oftentimes speak broken English.*

Thai cruise crew members were aware of the importance of intercultural communication as a tool for effective communication. Aside from fluent English, the message must be interculturally appropriate when they conversed with foreigners. As a result, intercultural communication was important for their professional and private lives on board a cruise ship. What's more, since they had to spend between six and ten months aboard during their contract, they were obliged to be constantly exposed to a multicultural atmosphere. Because of this, what they said and how they said it must not be offensive to people of different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, intercultural communication is essential not only for Thais but also for crew members of all nationalities.

### **Theme 2: Access to intercultural communication education**

#### **Extract 4**

*I did not study about intercultural communication at school. As an economics-major graduate, there were no courses concerning intercultural communication at all. As a result, I really had a hard time communicating with foreigners even though my English was quite fluent before I joined a cruise line. I think schools in Thailand should take this seriously by making intercultural communication mandatory for all students.*

#### **Extract 5**

*I majored in English, so there was a course about intercultural communication at my university. However, it was a selective course, so I did not choose it. Besides, at that time I was not aware of the importance of it, and there was no one who could give me advice. I think intercultural communication should be made a compulsory course for all students regardless of their major.*



### **Extract 6**

*I did not learn about intercultural communication at school. Also, my previous and current workplaces did not provide any course about it. Instead, I had to learn about it myself through my life experiences, so I am not very confident whether what I had learned is correct or not.*

The majority of Thai cruise crew members had not received formal education regarding intercultural communication. Many of them informally learned about it through their life and professional experiences. As a result, they were unsure whether what they had learned was considered appropriate. Therefore, they believed that if they had received intercultural communication education prior to graduation, they would not have struggled when they communicated with their international customers at their previous workplaces before joining a cruise ship. Additionally, although there was a series of training courses provided by the cruise line companies, none of them were about intercultural communication. Consequently, educational institutions and recruitment agencies in Thailand as well as international cruise line companies should provide their students and employees with formal intercultural communication instructions.

### **Theme 3: Identities**

#### **Extract 7**

*I had not thought about my Thai culture before until I became a cruise crew member. Being away from home for a long time, I feel so proud of my Thai heritage. Now I can say that I am proud to be Thai.*

#### **Extract 8**

*Being on an international cruise ship for a long time, I feel that I am representing my country all the time. Whatever I say or do reflects the images of Thailand, my homeland. That is why I am always careful when I talk to someone from other countries.*

#### **Extract 9**

*I usually stay with my other Thai coworkers because it is easy for us to get along. We speak the same language and share the same culture. I also see that people from the same country, region, or race tend to stick together. I think they also feel at home when they are together.*

During their contract period, Thai cruise crew members felt that their individual identity was less salient than their corporate identity. They did not fully feel like themselves at work. Instead, they needed to live their life as company workers. Moreover, many of them were lonely. Because their contract would be renewed individually, they did not have many friends at work. As a result, they often sought social groups which were oftentimes full of Thais or Asians. Furthermore, they felt that their international

colleagues also seemed to socialize with people of the same or similar nationalities or races. Besides, crew members occasionally argued or had disagreements with people of different nationalities or races. Therefore, national and regional identities also play a tremendous role. Subsequently, being interculturally competent is vital for all cruise crew members to live together harmoniously and empathetically.

## 5. Discussions

The findings suggested that many Thai cruise crew members had not received formal instructions at school regarding intercultural communication. Because of this, they had to learn about it from their workplaces and through their personal life. Since the majority had performed their duties as cruise crew members for six to ten years, and they were also required to have at least one year experience in a renowned hotel or restaurant prior to joining a cruise ship, they were equipped with a high level of intercultural communicative competence in general. Their strongest trait was their skill, followed by their attitude, action, and knowledge and understanding, based on the four domains of the Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013).

To achieve the first research objective: “to investigate the background of Thai cruise crew members’ intercultural communicative competence,” the data revealed that Thai cruise crew members graduated from multidisciplinary backgrounds. Many of them learned about intercultural communication through their professional and daily lives. That was because their schools, agencies, and cruise line companies did not provide them with such a course. This notion confirms the findings from Inkaew (2016) who found that Thai hotel personnel did not receive sufficient intercultural communication education at school despite their educational background in various fields. This shows that educational and professional institutions in Thailand need to seriously integrate intercultural communication education into their mandatory English classes, and allow all students regardless of major to study such courses.

By lacking formal intercultural communication education, Thai cruise crew members became unsure whether their intercultural attitude as well as knowledge and understanding were appropriate. As a result, their skills and actions were affected. This can be seen in the four domains of the Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013) that although Thai cruise crew members possessed a high level of intercultural communication in general, some of their abilities in each domain were still at a moderate level. This should not have occurred because not only were they required to have prior work experience in five-star hotels and restaurants, but most of them had also worked on a cruise ship for six to ten years. Since they were exposed to multiculturalism for years, their intercultural communicative competence should have been very high. As a result, schools, recruitment agencies, and cruise line

companies should seriously take this into consideration by improving their personnel to achieve a very high level of intercultural communicative competence.

To reach the second research objective: “to examine the level of intercultural communicative competence of Thai cruise crew members,” the four domains of the Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013) were measured. Thai cruise crew members’ attitude towards intercultural communication was moderate in terms of glorifying diversity of cultures, viewpoints, and social practices. Many of them believed that female passengers should receive services before males. However, in male-dominated cultures, males are known to receive privileges, including services, before females. By contrast, Thai cruise crew members were very highly competent in terms of attitude towards being broad-minded, curious, and willing to learn about new cultures as well as to tolerate practices which seem ambiguous and inconsistent in different cultures. This shows that their level of attitudinal intercultural communicative competence was inconsistent, probably because they had no formal education of intercultural communication. This affected to some degree the way they perceived different intercultural occurrences.

Thai cruise crew members’ knowledge and understanding of intercultural communication scored the least among the four domains of the Intercultural Component Model (Barrett et al., 2013). Although their overall knowledge and understanding appeared to be high, the scores seemed to fluctuate. To explain, their knowledge and understanding about the authenticity of different cultures were moderate. Many of them were unaware that passengers from North America may be of Asian descent and may not speak English fluently. By contrast, they scored very high in terms of their knowledge and understanding that people of different cultural orientations may have their own ways of beliefs and practices. Many of them were aware that Jewish or Muslim passengers need special meals and special places to perform their rituals when they are aboard. To explain such a phenomenon, their intercultural communication knowledge and understanding were inconsistent probably because they learned by themselves at the workplace and through their private life. As a result, they might have been unsure about what was right or wrong. Such notions support the findings by Inkaew (2016) who also discovered that Thai hotel front office workers were the most ignorant in their knowledge and understanding of intercultural communication. Consequently, Thai cruise crew members should be provided with formal instructions regarding intercultural communication, so that they can learn systematically and gain more confidence when they encounter intercultural exchanges.

The intercultural communication skills of Thai cruise crew members were very high when it came to their skill in finding information about their own and other cultures and their skill in interpreting and synthesizing information about their own and other cultures. Such notions support the results of Anantamongkolkul et al. (2019) who found that when the local Thais were skillful in intercultural communication, they were able to be aware of the different perceptions and practices of long-stay international tourists. They were also able to synthesize other cultures with their own. All in all, although

their overall intercultural communication skills were considered high, they can improve their skills in terms of decentralizing their ego and embrace new cultures as well as adapt themselves when they encounter intercultural situations. This was affirmed by Ou and Gu (2020) who found when students were well equipped with intercultural communication training, multicultural-aware students were more skillful in linguistically adapting themselves to multicultural situations better than local-minded students. By contrast, such findings were different from those by Nomnian and Jhaiyanuntana (2020) who found that Thai undergraduate hotel trainees had difficulties implementing their skills to discover new cultural knowledge and interact with international hotel guests. This could be because Thai cruise crew members were much more experienced in the multicultural atmosphere than undergraduate hotel trainees. This shows that Thai cruise crew members had the potential to excel in this domain if they had received proper intercultural communication education. Once they are formally trained, they could have more consistency in all the five attributes of the skill domain to some extent.

When it comes to actions, Thai cruise crew members' intercultural actions were considered high in general. Their action in appropriately and respectfully interacting according to the culture of people they were interacting with scored the lowest in the action domain. Many of them agreed to explain to their passengers about the inappropriateness of placing a souvenir Buddha image on the floor. This shows that Thai cruise crew members did not respect the passengers' cultures in which they regarded the Buddha image they had bought from a gift shop as a souvenir. This also indicates that many Thai cruise crew members were unsure about their actions although they were competent in their intercultural knowledge and understanding. Such findings confirmed the results from Phongsirikul and Thongrin (2019) who discovered that despite Thai students' positive attitudes towards their intercultural communication learning, they were hesitant to put their knowledge into action. This can possibly be explained that Thais seem to be collectivists. Thus, they were afraid to make mistakes among their group members. Simply put, their collectivism affected their actions. By contrast, the findings in this study were opposed to those by Semchuchot et al. (2021) who explored how Thai flight attendants conversed with Muslim passengers. They found that these flight attendants knew which topic was intercultural sensitive or appropriate to talk to Muslim passengers. Thus, they were confident to converse with these passengers. This is probably because many international airlines provide flight attendants with intercultural communication training. Therefore, they have the confidence to act intercultural.

A key finding from the open-ended portion of the survey indicates that despite Thai cruise crew members' awareness of the significance of intercultural communication, their identities were strongly affected. They tended to merely associate with others of the same or similar nationalities or races. That is possibly because people seem to attract and be attracted to those who are similar to their social groups. What's more, their national identity was often deemed the most salient when they were in a multicultural setting. This can be explained that when they were in a multicultural workplace overseas,

they tended to visualize their group to include people of the same nationalities. Hence, their national identity became the most salient to them.

To conclude, this study contributes new knowledge that Thai cruise crew members possessed a high level of intercultural communicative competence in general. However, they could further improve their competence in all intercultural attributes to be very high in order to match the nature of their work as service providers at world-class cruise line companies. As cruise services are considered one of the most important global businesses, their intercultural communicative competence should be of outstanding standard. Additionally, although these crew members realized the significance of intercultural communication, they felt that they needed to obtain formal intercultural communication education so that they can be more assured and know how to adjust themselves appropriately in multicultural settings.

### **5.1 Suggestions and implications**

Based on the findings of the study, there are several suggestions for future research. First, although findings in this study can be generalized due to the quantitative research design, qualitative design using interview and observation to elicit data may yield intriguing results. Second, since the majority of respondents in this study had worked as cruise crew members between six and ten years, future studies may highlight those with less work experience such as trainees or students who major in cruise service operations. Since these novices are about to or aim to join the cruise service industry, their intercultural communicative competence is also worth investigating. Third, the situation posited for each questionnaire item in this study was merely one of the many possibilities which occur in the Thai cruise crew member context. Future studies may alter these situations in order to see whether the results would be different. Fourth, the study was carried out without including the viewpoints from cruise passengers and stakeholders. Future research may include them in their studies. Lastly, it was found that aside from attitude, knowledge and understanding, skill, and action, the notion of social group and national identity should also be taken into account for future studies.

Since intercultural communicative competence in a professional context - notably in the cruise service industry - is underexplored in Thailand, the findings from this study have an academic implication in terms of filling this partial void in the literature. In terms of pedagogical implication, English language teachers should integrate intercultural communication into their English language lessons. Importantly, the findings of this study suggested that intercultural communication should be made mandatory for all students - not only for language and tourism majors. This is because workers in the field of cruise tourism are from multidisciplinary educational backgrounds. Furthermore, there are professional implications in this study for current and future Thai cruise crew members to reflect on and prepare themselves for this culturally diverse working environment. Finally, this study may serve as a guideline

for cruise line recruitment agencies, educators, and stakeholders in Thailand in designing effective training courses.

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