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A structural equation model of flight purser's leadership, cabin crew experience, and cabin crew engagement: A perspective on full-service airlines in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper assesses the suitable flight purser characteristics that influence the cabin crew experience, resulting in increased cabin crew engagement in the context of a full-service airline in Thailand. The research employed a quantitative method with structural equation modeling (SEM). The sample group consisted of cabin crew members operating for a full-service airline in Thailand. Following the observable variables and adhering to the rule of thumb, the sample group comprised at least 120 participants. It was found that (X^2/df) Chi-square/statistic comparing the tested model and the independent model with the dependent model = 1.695, (GFI) Goodness of Fit Index = 0.931, (NFI) Normal Fit Index = 0.930, (RMR) Root Mean Square Residual = 0.015. All these values from the analysis of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) on Flight Purser Leadership, Cabin Crew Experience, and Cabin Crew Engagement were in accordance with the criteria with the level of statistical significance $p < .05$. Hence, each hypothesis had a positive relationship. The study recommends developing the absorption facet among cabin crew by enhancing their engagement within the context of a full-service airline in Thailand. The airline may consider having flight pursers demonstrate gratitude for good relationships with colleagues; providing guidance of clear working procedures to cabin crew, providing assistance during work, and also, the airline may consider providing flight pursers the independence to solve problems on their own while performing duties.

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Introduction

The tourism and hospitality sector contributes significantly to accelerating economic development (Kortt et al., 2018). It is the most significant and rapidly growing industry in the world, and it contributes substantially to the economic and social growth of various countries around the globe (Johnson et al., 2019). Thailand's aviation sector has grown tremendously over the last several years. According to the Center of Aviation, competition in the low-cost carrier sector continues to strengthen in Thailand, and it has a significant effect on the competitiveness of full-service airlines. In order to differentiate themselves from competing rivals, airline businesses are constantly employed in the development and innovation of in-flight facilities and services (Suwarnnoi, 2016). Specifically, frontline employees are organization's representatives and regularly influence whether a customer returns to a company (Walter, 2017). Given the extensive research history on the importance of cabin crew, some studies suggest that the growth and development of the airline business are crucial (Chen, 2017). It is probable to state that frontline employees, particularly cabin crew, are the ones who have the most direct contact with passengers (Gibbs et al., 2017; Suthatorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2018). The cabin crew performs a vital role in guaranteeing passengers' satisfaction on their journey (Karatepe & Eslamlou, 2017; Tang et al., 2020). Airlines may establish a supportive working environment where they can employ and retain skilled cabin crew who are engaged with their responsibilities and who promote effective attitude and behavioral results in the performance (Karatepe & Talebzadeh, 2016). In addition, the engagement of cabin crew members is motivated by cabin crew experience, which includes a suitable opportunity for professional growth and working social support that is as significant as physical and emotional experience (Chen & Chen, 2012).

According to previous research, positive employee experiences in the workplace promote a perception of personal accountability, engagement, and obligation to the career transformation determination (Ramerman, 2019). As cabin crew members have a decent experience while doing their responsibilities, it results in their significant engagement (Bareket-Bojmel & Shuv-Ami, 2019). Furthermore, various studies have been conducted in the past that have placed a particular emphasis on the topic of leadership in various settings, specifically in tourism and academic fields (Piuchan & Prachansit, 2019). These studies have regularly discovered that leadership principles are a form of social influence by which one person may enroll the encouragement and guidance of others to accomplish a common objective (Beşikçi, 2019; Chemers, 2014).

Although previous research on leadership characteristics and employee engagement has been studied in detail, more attention should be paid to the relationship between leadership characteristics and employee engagement through employee experience. Even though little study has been performed on leaders' behaviors and the organizational environment they establish, the results are in employees' experiences as well as interpersonal connections inside the organization, which means supervisors and employees are all factors that affect employee engagement (Amah, 2018; May et al., 2004).

In conclusion, from the literature review, there has been research on the relationship between leadership and employee experience as well as employee experience and employee engagement in both service and hospitality industries in general business organizations. However, in the Thailand airline industry, the previous studies were not sufficient to explain the relationship between flight purser leadership, cabin crew experience, and cabin crew engagement. Thus, this research aims to address the existing academic gap by examining the relationship between flight pursers' leadership characteristics, cabin crew experience, and cabin crew engagement in a full-service airline in Thailand.

Literature review and hypotheses

Flight Purser Leadership Concepts

Regarding Flight Purser Leadership Concepts, it is essential to directly link the general discussion to the five specific components of leadership for clarity and better understanding. The IATA Operational Safety Audit emphasizes that adequately skilled cabin crew leaders typically possess the requisite experience as active cabin crew members, often defined as having at least one year of full-time experience, in addition to completing a leadership training program mandated by the operator (International Air Transport Association, (2024). Before assigning the role of a designated cabin crew leader, airlines must ensure that all relevant crew members have undergone this leadership training, as authorized or recognized by the appropriate regulatory authority. The flight purser, often serving as the supervisor of both senior and junior cabin crew members, is responsible for overseeing and communicating all actions and events during a flight to the

captain, the flight's leader (Mariska et al., 2015). Managing the conduct of cabin crew in varying work conditions is a challenging task, often handled by the flight purser (Vatankhah & Raoofi, 2018). The study identifies five key components of Flight Purser Leadership: (1) Moral Leadership (MO), which involves ethical decision-making and integrity; (2) Efficacy Leadership (EF), focusing on efficiency and effectiveness; (3) Mentor Leadership (ME), which emphasizes guiding and supporting team members; (4) Encouragement of Self-Initiation Leadership (EN), which fosters autonomy and initiative; and (5) Idealized Influence Leadership (IN), where leaders act as role models, inspiring and influencing others. These components are integral to understanding the specific leadership qualities that contribute to effective cabin crew management and engagement.

Cabin Crew Experience

In a recent study, various perspectives on employee experience were examined from various perspectives, such as employee well-being, psychological availability, job quality, and employee experience itself, which was then defined as cabin crew experience. Currently, several scholars have described the characteristics of employee experience in various facets.

Gemmill (2003) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the literature on the topics of organizational culture, employee experience, and leadership. They articulated that the personal styles of leadership have a significant impact on the employee experience and, therefore, on the overall corporate culture. In addition to a company's leadership style, the organization's culture plays a role in enhancing the employee experience. They revealed that employee experience components are perception, commitment, employee's satisfaction, and retention. They further explained that employee experience is associated with employee self-awareness, which, in turn, related to employee contentment and devotion to the organization. Employee experience, regularly referred to as one's comprehension of reality, is precisely the component that drives organizational collaborations, and therefore, recognizing employee perception contributes to comprehending the relationship balance (Gemmill, 2003). In summary, the concept of physical experience (PH) refers to the tangible and environmental aspects of the job that affect cabin crew members, such as workplace conditions, physical workload, and overall comfort during flights. Emotional experience (EM) encompasses the feelings and emotional responses of cabin crew members in their interactions with passengers, colleagues, and during work-related situations, which significantly influence their job satisfaction and psychological well-being. Learning experience (LE) involves the opportunities for professional development and skill acquisition that cabin crew members encounter, which contribute to their growth and competence in their roles. These components are essential as they collectively shape the overall cabin crew experience, influencing factors such as job satisfaction, engagement, and retention within the airline industry. Understanding these aspects provides a comprehensive view of how cabin crew members perceive and interact with their work environment, ultimately impacting their performance and organizational commitment.

Cabin Crew Engagement

In this study, Employee engagement is applied as the Cabin Crew Engagement. It has been the subject of a significant number of studies that have been published in the broader literature. According to many academics, the term "Employee Engagement" has gained substantial momentum in business organizations during the last two decades (Ibongia, 2018; Shuck et al., 2011). According to some experts, employee engagement, is a critical element of an employee's performance (Hartberg, 2018). Thus, this study will employ the social exchange theory developed by Agarwal et al, (2012) to investigate cabin crew engagement. Similar to the present research approach, the social exchange theory addresses the connection between organizational leadership and employee engagement. Moreover, employee engagement, according to the literature study, encompasses both work and employee engagement. The theory will be applied to the concept and characteristics of employee engagement, as well as their implementation. However, the significance of employee experience as a mediator will be also be examined. According to theories and concepts of literature study, the characteristics of cabin crew engagement could be identified as follows: Vigor: VI, Dedication: DE, Absorption: AB, and Increased Job Performance: IP.

Employee Experience and Employee Engagement Relationship

In the service and hospitality sectors, cabin crew members with a significant level of psychological experiences tend to be more engaged in their careers (Chen & Chen, 2012). Similarly, those with essential psychological resources exhibit higher job engagement, which correlates with improved service performance

(Chen et al., 2018). In general business organizations, the characteristic of employee experience related to psychological availability is defined as "the idea that one has the physical, emotional, or cognitive resources to contribute to one's own personal engagement for a specified period" (Kahn, 1990; as cited in Łaba & Geldenhuys, 2018). The emotional experiences of employees are significantly linked to their organizational engagement. It is evident that there is a relationship between employee experience, particularly in terms of organizational participation and engagement (Ramerman, 2019). Numerous studies have concluded that the outcomes of employees' experiences, alongside interpersonal connections within the organization, are critical factors influencing employee engagement (Amah, 2018; May et al., 2004; Rothmann, 2010; Ugwu et al., 2014). According to Kahn (1990 as cited in Garza 2018), when employees find meaning in their work, it enhances their level of engagement. Thus, the literature suggests a clear link between employee experience and engagement.

Methodology

Research framework

This study proposes a research framework for a structural equation model of flight purser leadership characteristics, cabin crew experience, and cabin crew engagement within a full-service airline in Thailand, as presented in Figure 1. This study focuses on the impact of each observed variable on cabin crew experience and cabin crew engagement, providing actionable insights for airlines to enhance these aspects. By understanding the specific influences of individual variables such as physical experience, emotional experience, and learning experience, airlines can tailor their development strategies to address each area systematically. This approach is particularly advantageous for organizations operating under budget constraints, as it allows for targeted interventions that maximize resource efficiency. The feedback provided will be incorporated into the next article, highlighting the practical application of these findings for continuous improvement in cabin crew management. This methodical, variable-by-variable development approach not only aligns with budgetary limitations but also ensures a focused and effective enhancement of the overall cabin crew experience and engagement.

Sampling and Data Collection

Following the observable variables and the rule of thumb, the size of the sample group will be determined by applying either 10 participants per variable or 20 participants per variable (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2011; Schumacker & Lomax, 2010). Consequently, applying this formula to the 12 observed variables in this study, the sample size will be determined to be 10 times the number of observed variables. As a result, a minimum 120 participants will be included in the sample group. For the purpose of selecting the sample group, a probability sampling technique is employed. Specifically, a simple random sampling method will be used, involving cabin crew members from a full-service airline in Thailand. The selection process will involve a computer randomly choosing names from a list provided by the director of the airline's cabin operations department.

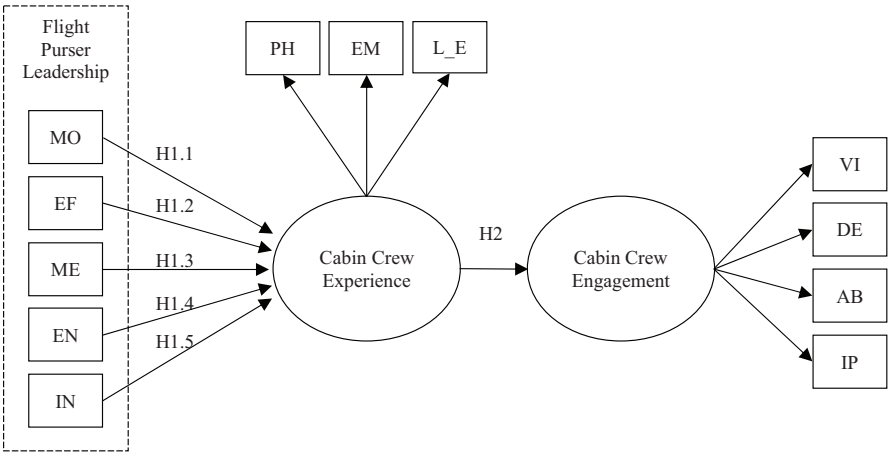

Figure 1 A structural equation model of flight purser leadership, cabin crew experience, and cabin crew engagement in the context of a full-service airline in Thailand

Data Analysis and Results

In the data analysis of the questionnaires, there were 120 respondents (n = 120). It was found that most were females, with 88 females or 73.3 percent and 32 males or 26.7 percent. 112 respondents were Gen Y born between 1980–1992 or 93.3 percent, and 5 respondents were Gen X born between 1965–1979 or 4.2 percent. In terms of respondents' educational level, 98 respondents graduated with B.A. Degree, or 81.7 percent, and 22 respondents graduated with M.A. Degree, or higher or 18.3 percent. Out of the respondents, 74 individuals, representing 61.1 percent, have 9–11 years of working experience. This is followed by 39 respondents, or 32.5 percent, with 7–9 years of experience. There were 6 respondents, making up 5.0 percent, with 4–6 years of experience, and only 1 respondent, or 0.8 percent, with 1–3 years of experience.

Measurement Model

The data analysis for this study included thorough checks for kurtosis, skewness, and multicollinearity to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. Kurtosis and skewness were assessed to confirm the normality of the distribution of variables, with all measures falling within acceptable ranges, indicating that the data are approximately normally distributed. Additionally, multicollinearity was evaluated by examining the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values for each predictor variable. The VIF values were well below the commonly accepted threshold of 10, and tolerance values were above 0.1, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in this dataset. These diagnostic checks confirm that the data meet the necessary assumptions for proceeding with the structural equation modeling analysis (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2011).

The testing of the relationship of the Observed Variables was based on KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, the results of the analysis of Kaiser-Mefer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy: KMO = the value of which should not be lower than 0.6 (Hair et al., 1995) with the results of the analysis KMO = 0.912, p= 0.000. It could be summarized that the Observed Variables were not the identity matrix that could be used to analyze the factors. The testing of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was $p < .05$. The KMO should not be lower than 0.6 (Hair et al., 1995). After that, the researcher tests the correlation matrix among Observed Variables. It consisted of the Observed Variables requiring 7 variables with the Interval scale and the Ratio Scale by using the Pearson Product Moment (PE) consisting of 3 variables of Cabin Crew Experience and 4 variables of Cabin Crew Engagement to test the relationship of the correlated Independent Variables, whether the relationship was too high to cause the problem of the correlation relationship that was too high with over 0.80 (Multicollinearity Problem) (Mohamad Asri et al., 2018).

Structural Equation Model Results

Figure 2 shows the results of the analysis of the structural relationship of flight purser leadership, Cabin Crew Experience, and Cabin Crew Engagement: A Perspective of Full-Service Airline in Thailand revealed that x^2/df = 1.695, which was lower than 3.

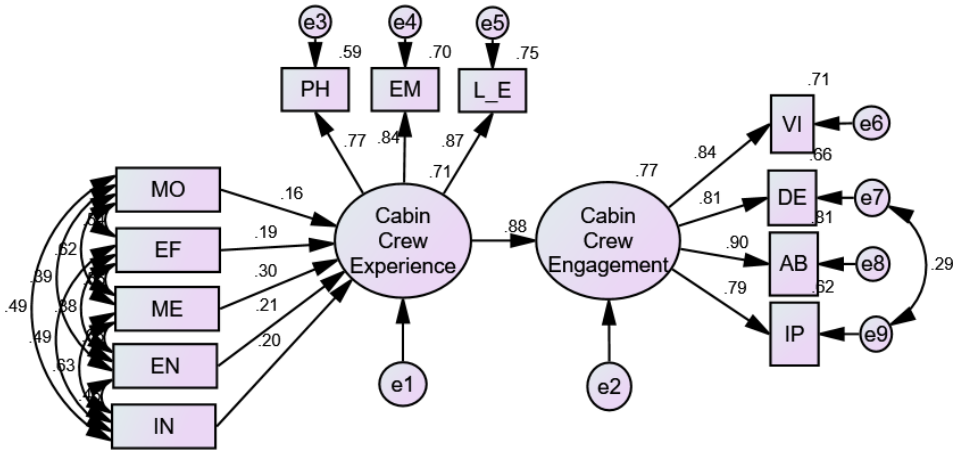

Figure 2 The results of the analysis of the structural relationship of flight purser leadership, cabin crew experience, and cabin crew engagement

Thus, this model could be used to identify whether the information was consistent with the conceptual framework. The consideration of the index set according to the criteria of the structural equation at the level of over or equal to 0.90 revealed that GFI = 0.919, CFI = 0.969, and NFI = 0.930, all of which passed the criteria. As for the set index with lower than 0.05 and 0.08, it revealed that RMR = 0.015, which passed the criteria as well. It could be concluded that the structural relationship of Flight Purser Leadership consisted of Moral Leadership (B = 0.16), Efficacy Leadership (B = 0.19), Mentoring Leadership (B = 0.30), Encouragement of Self Initiation Leadership (B = 0.21). Idealized Influence Leadership (B = 0.20) had positive relationship with Cabin Crew Experience, and Cabin Crew Experience had positive relationship with cabin crew Engagement (B = 0.88).

Table 1 shows the testing of the research hypothesis which revealed that Flight Purser Leadership had a positive relationship with Cabin Crew Experience: A Perspective of Full–Service Airline in Thailand and Cabin Crew Experience had a positive relationship with Cabin Crew Engagement with a level of statistical significance at .00 ($p < .05$) (Hair et al., 1995). The index of the statistics that passed the model criteria would be consistent with the empirical data and could be confirmed from the analysis of the Structural Equation Model (SEM). It was found that (X^2/df) Chi-square/statistic comparing the tested model and the independent model with the dependent model = 1.695, (GFI) Goodness of Fit Index = 0.931, (NFI) Normal Fit Index = 0.930, (RMR) Root Mean Square Residual = 0.015. All these values from the analysis of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) on Flight Purser Leadership, Cabin Crew Experience, and Cabin Crew Engagement were in accordance with the criteria with the level of statistical significance $p < .05$. Hence, each hypothesis had a positive relationship. As a result, it can be inferred that the structural equation model, which posits a relationship between flight purser leadership characteristics, cabin crew experience, and cabin crew engagement, aligns with the hypothesized framework as substantiated by empirical evidence.

Discussion Implications and Recommendation

According to the research findings from this current study, the structural model generated from the literature analysis, which was then adjusted in accordance with the empirical data, is suitable for developing cabin crew engagement of a full-service airline in Thailand. Absorption is the most statistically significant aspect of cabin crew engagement and might be the first to develop. The essential opinion on the absorption aspect of cabin crew engagement is that they are happy and enjoy working, followed by the feeling that time flies while working every day, enthusiasm in assigned work, and a strong tie with the profession and assigned duty.

Furthermore, the findings of this study align with those of various scholars who have demonstrated that leaders' behaviors and the organizational environment they create significantly impact both employees' experiences and interpersonal relationships within the organization, thereby influencing employee engagement levels (Amah, 2018; May et al., 2004; Rothmann, 2010; Ugwu et al., 2014). Similarly, Yim (2021) noted that the relationship developed between a leader and a team member, often referred to as the "employee experience," is a crucial factor in promoting employee engagement. Additionally, Ramerman (2019) emphasized that organizations benefit from leaders who can cultivate authentic relationships with employees, thereby enhancing the employee experience. Leaders who possess strong coaching skills and effective communication are particularly capable of fostering a positive employee experience, which in turn, boosts employee engagement (Ramerman, 2019; Turner & Kalman, 2015).

The research presented in this paper introduces a new body of knowledge that aligns with and expands upon existing theories in the field of employee engagement and leadership, particularly in the aviation industry. It highlights the critical role of flight purser leadership characteristics in enhancing cabin crew engagement through improved cabin crew experience. This study corroborates existing theories that posit a strong link between leadership behaviors and employee engagement.

Table 1 Standardized regression weights

Relationship			Estimate	*SE*	C.R.	*p*
Cabin_Crew_Experience	<---	MO	0.16	0.250	2.158	.031*
Cabin_Crew_Experience	<---	EF	0.19	0.316	2.579	.010*
Cabin_Crew_Experience	<---	ME	0.30	0.218	3.065	.002*
Cabin_Crew_Experience	<---	EN	0.21	0.342	2.976	.003*
Cabin_Crew_Experience	<---	IN	0.20	0.203	2.670	.008*
Cabin_Crew_Engagement	<---	Cabin_Crew_Experience	0.88	0.033	9.388	.000*

**Note:* $p < .05$.

The findings provide empirical evidence supporting the application of the Social Exchange Theory in understanding the dynamics of organizational behavior within airlines, contributing a unique contextual understanding of these interactions in the aviation sector. This research fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the specific context of full-service airlines in Thailand, thereby offering practical implications for improving employee engagement strategies in similar service-oriented industries. In addition, further research could develop new bodies of knowledge by focusing on the direct impact of Flight Purser characteristics on cabin crew engagement. Alternatively, other variables could be integrated into the model to explore these specific areas in more detail. Finally, airlines should consider implementing several strategies to enhance the absorption level in cabin crew engagement. Flight pursers can play a crucial role by expressing gratitude for positive collegial relationships and providing clear guidance on working procedures. Additionally, they can offer assistance during work activities and empower flight attendants to resolve issues during flights independently. This approach should foster a warm and friendly working environment characterized by mutual assistance, opportunities for expressing opinions, and respect among colleagues, ultimately contributing to higher levels of absorption and engagement among cabin crew members.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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