



## Antecedents and outcomes of flight attendants' job satisfaction

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### A B S T R A C T

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This paper develops and tests a comprehensive model for job satisfaction amongst flight attendants with antecedents and outcomes that are germane in the context of airlines. The antecedents are: jetlag, role overload, emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalization, and the outcomes are: job performance and service recovery performance. A framework was tested using structural equation modelling. A survey was conducted of flight attendants working in Malaysia found exhaustion and personal accomplishment have a direct effect on job satisfaction; emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment affect the level of depersonalization; and role overload has a positive relationship.

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### 1. Introduction

As a result of increased price pressure from low cost carriers and a global macro economic downturn, many traditional airlines have sought to reduce their costs. In the US, for example, have affected crew including the minimum layover period being reduced from 44 h to 24 h, "reduced rest" provision in the Federal Aviation Administration's Flight Attendant Duty Time and Rest regulations from nine to eight h, and the number of flight attendants allocated flights has been reduced. These reductions of layover period, rest time and flight attendants may affect cabin crew through increased fatigue, disruptions to efficient service delivery and low morale.

There are a few studies of fatigue, jetlag, and sleep deprivations on flight attendants. Despite similarities in the risks related to air travel, such as flying over different zones, disruptions of circadian rhythms, and sleep deprivations caused by odd working schedules, flight attendants' well being and state of health are being overshadowed by the importance in ensuring the level of alertness amongst the pilots. The job descriptions of pilots and flight attendants demand continuous vigilance in carrying out their duties and flight attendants are equally responsible for the safety and comfort of the passengers.

Most airlines seek to ensure high levels of job satisfaction and performance amongst flight attendants. Many researchers have argued that job satisfaction is a key to job performance and service recovery (Edward et al., 2008). This study analyzes the antecedents

and consequences of job satisfaction among flight attendants. Specifically, we argue the roles of jetlag, role overload, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment as antecedents of job satisfaction and the roles of job performance and service recovery as outcomes of job satisfaction.

#### 1.1. Theoretical framework

Various theories have been postulated to explain what makes people satisfied or dissatisfied with their jobs. Job satisfaction has been studied as the outcome of some factors or as the cause of some consequences (Staples and Higgins, 1998). In this research, we have studied job satisfaction as an outcome and also as the cause of some consequences. The framework developed has its roots in content and performance-based theories. The antecedents of job satisfaction, jetlag, role overload, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, are taken from the motivator-hygiene factor theory (Herzberg et al., 1959) and the outcomes, job performance and service recovery performance, from the performance-based theory (Judge et al., 2001). The conceptual framework used is given in Fig. 1.

#### 1.2. Jetlag versus job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion

According to Srinivasan et al. (2008), jetlag or flight dysrhythmia is a temporary misalignment between circadian clock and external time, which occurs as a result of rapid travel across time zones. The effects of jetlag on individuals vary depending upon the number of time zones crossed and the direction of travel, with eastward flights resulting in slower adaptation than westward flights (Burgess and

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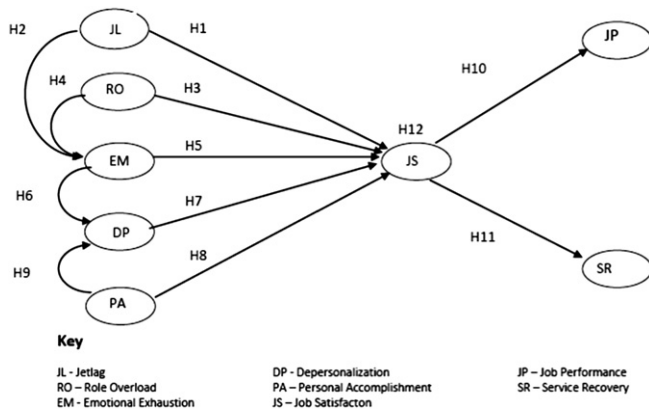


Fig. 1. Basic analytical framework.

Lockwood, 2006). The symptoms of jetlag include fatigue, loss of appetite, decreased abilities to concentrate and maintain motivation to perform tasks, and increased irritability. The jetlag symptoms tend to have a direct impact on the performance of aircrews (Yen et al., 2009), thus:

H1: Jetlag symptoms have a negative relationship with job satisfaction of flight attendants.

Emotional exhaustion is physical fatigue and mental weariness due to an individual's incapability to get sufficient resources required to fulfil performance expectation (Cole and Bedeian, 2007). It arises from feelings of tension and frustration due to individual's fear that they will be unable to provide previous levels of work performance (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993). Since jetlag leads to constant tiredness as a result of sleep loss, jetlag may increase flight attendants' feeling of emotional exhaustion, thus:

H2: Jetlag symptoms have a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion of flight attendants.

### 1.3. Role overload versus job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion

According to Sieber (1974), role overload refers to "constraints imposed by time; as role obligations increase, sooner or later a time barrier is confronted that forces the actor to honour some roles at the expense of honouring others.". The workload of flight attendants involves handling of trolleys, handling of trays, walking up-and-down the aisle several times to answer the calls of passengers, helping children and old passengers, and many other such tasks. The workloads of individual attendants increases when their number is reduced putting additional pressure on them to complete the tasks, such as meal services, within the stipulated time. The time pressure may force flight attendants to perform certain tasks at the expense of other tasks. Therefore, the flights attendants may be perceived as being less effective in performing their tasks. Consequently, the flight attendants may see themselves as being less capable to meet the demands of the customers. According to Sieber, such role overload leads to reduced job satisfaction, thus:

H3: Role overload has a negative relationship with job satisfaction of flight attendants.

An individual's inability to perform a task to expectations may lead to feelings of tension and frustration. Since role overload is a result of resource reduction, insufficient resources certainly add to flight attendants' feeling of emotional exhaustion, thus:

H4: Role overload has a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion of flight attendants.

### 1.4. Emotional exhaustion versus job satisfaction and depersonalization

Flight attendants are constantly in touch with the passengers and spend considerable amount of their time with them (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). The constant exposure to passenger's wrath and the lack of resources cause increased feelings of emotional exhaustion. As confirmed by previous studies, the depletion or scarcity of organizational resources, coupled with constant or even increased performance expectations may have drastic and deleterious effects on employees' emotional exhaustion (Shirom, 2003).

Besides physical labour, flight attendants are expected to deliver "emotional labour" where they are required to suppress feelings in order to sustain outward countenance (Hochschild, 1983). The suppression of actual emotions and the accumulated frustrations may lead flight attendants to become estranged. Hence, high level of emotional exhaustion makes flight attendants' perceive themselves less capable of handling their job, therefore, resulting in low job satisfaction. Piko (2006) also found that the level of job satisfaction decreases with the level of emotional exhaustion, thus:

H5: Emotional exhaustion has a negative relationship with job satisfaction of flight attendants.

Emotional exhaustion is likely to cause depersonalization feeling among flight attendants. Depersonalization occurs when individuals distance themselves from their work by creating dehumanizing perceptions of tasks, clients, or co-workers (Kahn et al., 2006). Severe emotional exhaustion naturally drives flight attendants to distance themselves from work. Thus:

H6: Emotional exhaustion of flight attendants has a positive relationship with depersonalization.

### 1.5. Depersonalization versus job satisfaction

An individual suffering from depersonalization creates a buffer in an effort to relieve some of the negative outcomes they are experiencing. Typical outcomes of depersonalization are: hostility, indifference, detachment, and not caring about others (Garden, 1987). Flight attendants are likely to experience some level of depersonalization or dehumanization given the reduction of resources and exposure to passengers' wrath. This gives rise to a feeling of helplessness as they are not able to perform their duties as desired. The high feeling of depersonalization or detachment from their work result in flight attendants not performing their tasks wholeheartedly, making them feel less meaningful on their job. Piko (2006) has found a negative relationship between depersonalization and job satisfaction among health care staff. The extent of customer contact and the kinds of problems faced by health care staff and flight attendants are similar, thus:

H7: Depersonalization has a negative relationship with job satisfaction of flight attendants.

### 1.6. Personal accomplishment versus job satisfaction and depersonalization

Personal accomplishment measures the feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Professional efficacy, referred to as personal accomplishment, is characterized by a sense of self-efficacy, a high sense of achievement and productivity, and a high level of competency (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Flight attendants who have a high level of perceived personal accomplishment tend to be

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