



# Examining the moderating effects of service climate on psychological capital, work engagement, and service behavior among flight attendants



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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to validate the mediating process of “psychological capital-work engagement-service behavior”, and examines the moderated mediating effect of service climate. By questionnaire survey, this study investigated 375 flight attendants of China Airlines based in Taiwan, and validated the hypotheses through hierarchical regression analysis. The results showed that flight attendants with high psychological capital tend to show more work engagement and better service behavior. Moreover, work engagement is the mediator between psychological capital and service behavior. According to the moderated mediating result, the impact of service climate in the mediating process is originated from the positive relationship of service climate with work engagement and service behavior. In other words, the mediating effect of work engagement changes with service climate. Finally, based on the research findings, this study proposes managerial implications as reference for internal marketing of airlines.

## 1. Introduction

According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), person-time of passengers of flight vehicles increases year by year, reaching 3.6 billion persons-times in 2016. With the increased number of flights, “red-eye flights” become more common. However, the recruitment and training of new flight attendants for airlines cannot meet the growing demand, thus the flight attendants face increasing working hours, both day and night shifts, and elevated work stress. Flight attendants are the front-line service personnel, their hair style, dress, pose, and emotional expressions should meet the regulations of airlines (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, they face irregular work schedule to accommodate the flights (Liang and Hsieh, 2005). As a result, they encounter the burden of both emotional and aesthetic labor (Hochschild, 1983; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Tsaour and Tang, 2013). With such job characteristics, the flight attendants tend to bear high work pressure (Boyd and Bain, 1998), which can influence their job performance (Chen and Kao, 2012). Therefore, in such working environments, the flight attendants' psychological capital characteristics of optimism, persistence, and continuity to accomplish goals are the key factors.

Psychological capital is conceptualized as a personal-level concept (Dawkins et al., 2015), and is a type of personal resource, which emphasizes that employees accomplish personal goals through their psychological advantages (Yu and Kim, 2015; Avey et al., 2011b). Luthans,

Avey, Avolio, Norman, and Combs (2006) suggested that, even when facing difficulties, people with rich psychological capital could maintain a positive attitude. Previous research indicated that employees with high psychological capital perform better at work (Avey et al., 2011b; Luthans et al., 2013; Walumbwa et al., 2010a). Karatepe and Talebzadeh (2016) stated that flight attendants with rich psychological capital are better at adjusting their attitude toward the job and concentrating on their work. Some studies have mentioned that when employees have high concentration and psychological resilience, their work performance is better (Zeithaml et al., 1988; Greguras and McCook, 2004). Schaufeli and Taris (2014) indicated that when employees have rich personal resources, they could make efforts at work with high vigor and psychological resilience. Recent studies have demonstrated that work engagement is the mediator between personal resources (or psychological capital) and job performance (Chaurasia and Shukla, 2014; Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). Thus, this study argues that flight attendants with rich psychological resources are more confident and optimistic at work, have high psychological resilience, are willing to make efforts at work, and stay focused at work with outstanding performance even when they encounter difficulties. In other words, flight attendants' work engagement is the mediator between psychological capital and service behavior.

Previous research on “psychological capital-work engagement-job performance” mostly focused on employees' individual dimensions (Bakker and Leiter, 2010; Chaurasia and Shukla, 2014), but neglected

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the possible impact of the service climate in organizations. In the airline industry, however, the flight attendants' job performance is reflected in their service behavior, which is associated with the service quality perceived by customers (Bitner, 1990; Lytle et al., 1998; Karatepe and Talebzadeh, 2016). In order to deliver good service behavior, besides flight attendants' personal psychological capital and work engagement, the support of the service climate of airlines is also important. Service climate refers to employees' perceptions of the practices, procedures, and behaviors that are rewarded, supported, and expected, with regard to customer service and customer service quality (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998, p. 151). Salanova, Agut, and Peiró (2005) indicated that when organizations create a high-quality service climate through managerial measures, it would enhance the positive relationship between work engagement and service behavior. Baba, Tourigny, Wang, and Liu (2009) suggested that when employees in the airline industry perceive high service climate, the relationship between active personality and job performance is positively correlated. Thus, there is a direct relationship among service climate, work engagement, and job performance. This study argues that if flight attendants with high psychological capital can highly engage in their job, they would exhibit better service behavior. In other words, flight attendants with high work engagement can more easily control and demonstrate high-quality service behavior with the support of strong service climate. On the contrary, with low service climate, even flight attendants with high work engagement cannot easily show positive service behavior. In other words, the mediating process of "psychological capital-work engagement-service behavior" is moderated by service climate, and is originated from the reinforcement of the service climate on the impact of work engagement in relation to service behavior. This is a topic seldom discussed in previous research.

Based on the relationship between individuals and job, this study attempts to include organizational service climate, and its possible role. According to past research, psychological capital and work engagement are important variables of service behavior (Avey et al., 2010a; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008). From the managerial perspective of airlines, how to help flight attendants achieve high-quality service performance is an important goal. Understanding the role of service climate in "psychological capital-work engagement-service behavior" can help organizations to formulate human resources development strategies, so as to enhance positive service behavior and create satisfying service quality for customers.

From the perspective of theoretical development, this study explored the moderating mediator of service climate, thereby filling the gap of past research. To sum up, this study examined the mediating process of "psychological capital-work engagement-service behavior" and the moderating effect of service climate in the mediating model.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. Psychological capital and service behavior

Psychological capital is the individuals' capital, which can be developed, measured, and effectively managed, and its effect could benefit organizational development (e.g. Luthans and Youssef, 2007; Sweetman et al., 2011). Luthans and Youssef (2007) emphasized that psychological capital is a psychological state that can be changed by development. Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2007) further indicated that psychological capital includes four characteristics: 1) self-efficacy: someone who has confident in challenging tasks to succeed; 2) optimism: someone who makes a positive attribution about succeeding now and in the future; 3) hope: some who perseveres toward goals and redirects their path to accomplish goals, as necessary; 4) resilience: someone who has the capacity of self-recovery, and even become superior to the original state when encountering problems and difficulties. Subsequent studies mostly adopted these four characteristics to explore psychological capital (Avey et al., 2010b; Norman et al., 2010).

Service behavior is the explicit behavior of action, voice, and attitude of front-line employees when serving customers (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997), which can be classified into role-prescribed and extra-role service behavior. Role-prescribed service behavior refers to the employees' behavior to serve customers, as expected by organizations, and based on explicit or implicit rules at the workplace. Extra-role service behavior refers to discretionary behaviors of contact employees in serving customers that extend beyond formal role requirements (Tsaour and Lin, 2004). Service behavior is necessary for a future service relationship, and is regarded as the symbol of organizational service quality (Farrell et al., 2001). Previous empirical studies showed that internal personal factors, such as job satisfaction (Limpanitgul et al., 2013) and psychological capital (Walumbwa et al., 2010b) influence the performance of service behavior. Thus, psychological capital can be treated as one of the predisposing factors of service behavior.

Psychological capital can enhance the effectiveness of personal action capacity, and is important in realizing goals, motivation, success, and performance (Stajkovic, 2006). Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, and Li (2005) suggested that employees with high resilience could deal with and solve problems through past experience to result in positive job performance. Youssef and Luthans (2007) indicated that when employees are optimistic, they could accomplish the goals and tasks required at work, and even provide extra service beyond their duties. Jung and Yoon (2015) also demonstrated that when front-line hotel staffs have high psychological capital, they tend to show high-quality service behavior. Subsequent studies also found that when employees have rich psychological capital, their job performance is better (Bouckenoghe et al., 2015; Kappagoda et al., 2014). Flight attendants deal with narrow spaces and cabin pressure when serving customers, thus, the cultivation of a positive psychological state is important. When flight attendants are on duty, and encounter problems, they should have the confidence to accept challenging tasks, and be optimistic and persistent to show the role-prescribed service behavior, as expected by the airlines, and further actively demonstrate the extra-role service behavior that satisfies customers. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Flight attendants with rich psychological capital have better service behavior.

### 2.2. The mediating role of work engagement

Kahn (1990) first proposed the concept of work engagement, which suggests that engagement means employees control themselves and fully perform their roles at work. It also reflects individuals' motivation to be devoted to work and shows their control of work competence (Kahn, 1990). Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) demonstrated that work engagement is a kind of psychological state that is correlated with positiveness, self-realization, and job, and also contains vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor means employees are energetic at work and are willing to contribute. Dedication means employees recognize the importance of the job, are willing to face challenges, and have passion at work. Absorption means employees are completely concentrated and engaged in work, feel that time passes quickly, and they are not easily influenced by things around them. Briefly speaking, engaged employees have high levels of energy. They are enthusiastic about their work, and because they enjoy their work, time passes quickly (May et al., 2004).

Russell and Carroll (1999) suggested that, in order for employees to be fully engaged at work, they should have positive psychological states (stable, optimistic, and pleasant). Rich psychological capital can enhance employees' optimism, so that they treat everything positively (Carver and Scheier, 2005; Luthans et al., 2007), identify with the organizations, and are more devoted to work tasks (Larson and Luthans, 2006). Karatepe and Talebzadeh (2016) also proved that when flight attendants have higher psychological capital, they have higher degrees of work engagement. In addition, when employees are energetic and

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