

The Relationship Between Positive Psychological Capital and Job Burnout: A Study of Thai Airways International Flight Attendants

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This study investigates the relationship between levels of positive psychological capital (PsyCap) and burnout among Thai flight attendants who are currently working for Thai Airways International. The sample included 305 flight attendants. The results indicate that the perceptions of their burnout level is low ($mean = 2.10$), and degree of their PsyCap is moderate ($mean = 3.73$); the aggregate of PsyCap and the burnout levels are found to be significantly negative ($r = -0.42$). All four components of PsyCap are negatively related to the level of burnout. The paper discusses the future research agenda. The implications of these findings and benefits of developing PsyCap for organisations are also discussed in the light of these findings.

Keywords: positive psychological capital, burnout, flight attendant, Thailand

The airline industry has been part of the service industry in Thailand. More specifically, since the ASEAN strategic transport plan has been approved an integration on air transport by establishing a single aviation market by the end of 2015 (Tan, 2014). There are attempts from many airlines to seek for ways to increase profits and productivity by decreasing operational costs. There are social trends including improving quality of work life and promote safety and health among employees.

As airline industry is a service-intensive nature and highly related to emotional labours. The roles of flight attendants are the ones that mostly involve with contacting with passengers for a long period of time when compared to other employees from different departments (Chang & Ju-Mei, 2009). They are referred to as the first-line service attendants.

In today's environment, developing and managing human resources have become a crucial factor for sustained organisational performance (F. Luthans, K. W. Luthans, & B. C. Luthans, 2004). Instead of focusing on what is wrong and dysfunctional with people, it is better off to focus on personal's strengths and good qualities, namely psychological capital (PsyCap). It refers to the four positive psychological capacities: confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience. PsyCap has a positive relation with the improvement in many important aspects of individuals in the workplace, such as job satisfaction, commitment, work performance, and well-being (Avey, Luthans, Smith, & Palmer, 2010).

There have been several studies on the relationship between emotional labour and job burnout among

flight attendants in the Thai aviation context. Thus, the primary focus of this study is the PsyCap and job burnout with the following objectives: (1) examining the status of flight attendants' level of PsyCap and burnout; (2) exploring the relationship between the level of flight attendants' PsyCap and burnout; and (3) understanding whether PsyCap could positively reliably predicts the level of burnout. The paper begins with a brief overview of the theoretical concepts of positive psychological capital and job burnout. The next section presents the methods and data analysis. It is followed by recommendations and conclusion.

Theoretical Foundations

Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap)

Martin Seligman, a psychologist, challenged the field to change from a preoccupation with what is wrong and dysfunctional with people to what is right and good about them (F. Luthans et al., 2004). This concept was then derived from that. PsyCap is a developmental state with the composition of attitudinal and cognitive resources that have a positive effect on individual performance (Wooley, Caza, & Levy, 2011). Further, PsyCap is a valuable source of competitive advantage for individual and organisation to build as they provides benefits on organisational performance (F. Luthans et al., 2004).

PsyCap refers to an individuals' positive psychological state of development. It is a collection of motivational and behavioural tendencies derived from four components: (1) self-efficacy—individual's confidence as the conviction about his/her abilities to mobilise the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to implement a specific task within a given context (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998); (2) optimism—individual's willingness to engage and achieve goals. It draws from attribution theory in terms of the tendency to make stable for positive or negative events (Seligman, 2002); (3) hope—individual's belief in their ability to success and also the level of sense of successful that individual hold (Peterson & Luthans, 2003); and (4) resilience—the capacity to bounce back from setbacks encountered along the way (Ledesma, 2014).

Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome (Maslach et al., 1986), underlying consensus about three core dimensions of burnout experience. The central quality of burnout and the most significant of this complex syndrome is exhaustion (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). In general, when people describe their symptoms or experiences of burnout, they mostly refer to the experience of exhaustion. The three components of burnout are (1) exhaustion—It refers to the draining of emotional resources. Individuals feel the lack of energy. It then shows in the prompt actions to distance oneself emotionally and cognitively from one's work. They feel they are at the end of their rope (Enzmann, Schaufeli, Janssen, & Rozeman, 1988). Particularly, within the human service, the emotional demands of the work can exhaust a flight attendant (Chang & Ju-Mei, 2009); (2) depersonalisation—This is an attempt to put distance between oneself and service recipients by actively ignoring the quality of service and treating passenger with personal devaluation attitude as a result, the service recipients are labelled in an insulting way and treated accordingly (Enzmann et al., 1988); and (3) reduced professional efficacy—It is a tendency to evaluate one's work with service recipients negatively. Individuals have a belief that they are no longer able to accomplish tasks or organisational goals. Because it is difficult to gain a sense of accomplishment when suffering from exhausted. Having a low efficacy appears to grow in parallel with the other two burnout aspects, rather than sequentially. This can lead to the lack of motivation and poor performance (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Job Characteristics of Flight Attendants and Burnout

In this study, the researchers focused on the flight attendants' job characteristics that relate to occurrence of job burnout.

1. Quantitative job demands—Flight attendants experience workload and time pressure. Irregular working schedule strongly related to burnout, especially the exhaustion.

2. Severity of client problem—Several studies have shown the relationships between aspects of emotion work and emotional exhaustion, which is the key component of work out.

3. Expectations of the duty—In this profession, the management of emotions is considered a central part of flight attendants' duty. Although they sometimes encounter difficult situations or emotional dissonance, they have to display appropriate emotions and actions guided by certain rules and policy. This may lead them to feel exhausted.

Relationship Between PsyCap and Burnout

Liang and Hsieh (2007) suggested a relationship between burnout and workplace abnormality. The significance of burnout has a linkage to important organisational outcomes, such as job performance, absenteeism, intention to leave the job, lower productivity, and effectiveness at work (Walter & Raybould, 2007). Consequently, it is associated with decreased job satisfaction and a reduced commitment to the job or the organisation (Zapf, 2002).

Individuals who are experiencing burnout are likely to have a negative impact on their own health, both psychological and physical. In addition, burnout can also cause greater personal conflict by disrupting job tasks among those who have burnout (Burke & Greenglass, 2001). In contrast, individuals with high level of PsyCap have a likelihood to pursue better goals more effectively with commitment. PsyCap is durable enough to influence individuals' behaviours and performance in a long term. Further, the positive relation between PsyCap with an increase of job satisfaction and commitment, reduced absenteeism reduced turnover rate, reduced stress, improved leadership skill, and work performance are empirically proved (i.e., Sweetman & Luthans, 2010; Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009; Abdullah, 2009).

In this study, it can summarise that the working environment of flight attendants is unusual as they have uncertain working time schedules and have to deal with time zone differences. Moreover, flight attendants are also required to work on tasks and spend mental and physical effort (Zapf, 2002). Emotion work has been a major part of their job; they need to put an effort to plan and control their expression in order to ensure that their performance is met with the organisational desires (Zapf, 2002). Such working conditions constitute the negative influence on both psychological and physical health, which subsequently lead to burnout among them. Thus, it can be hypothesised that the level of PsyCap and burnout among Thai flight attendants is negatively related.

Methods and Methodology

In this section, we describe the population, data collection techniques, instrumentation, and the data analyses used.

Population, Sample and Data Collection

The population of this study was flight attendants who are currently employed at Thai Airways International. The total number of the flight attendants were 5,725 flight attendants (Thai Airways International

Annual Report, 2016). The sample size was calculated by using Taro Yamane formula which the required to collect data at a minimum of 377 flight attendants and increase the size of the sample by 10%, therefore the size of the sample was 415 flight attendants.

The researchers sent 415 questionnaires by mail with a statement that completion of the questionnaire would constitute agreement of informed consent. The participants were requested to return a completed questionnaire in a closed envelope to the lead author's personal campus mailbox. We received 305 questionnaires back. The response rate was 73.49%.

Instruments

The questionnaire contained three sections—demographic information, PsyCap, and Burnout. The items used were validated and tested for reliability.

Positive psychological capital questionnaire. The PsyCap questionnaire in the Thai version developed by Wongtone (2011) was chosen. These items were developed based on Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman's (2007) conceptualisation. Participants rated their level of PsyCap with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"). There are 24 items ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Maslach burnout inventory. This portion of the survey contained 22 items on developed by Maslach and Jackson (1986). The translated version by Taengpetch (2015) was chosen. Participants used 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree") to rate their level of burnout ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Number	%
Gender		
Male	74	24.30
Female	231	75.70
Educational level		
Bachelor	233	76.40
Master	66	21.60
Doctoral	6	2
Age		
Below 25	1	0.30
26-35	29	9.50
36-45	135	44.30
46 and above	140	45.90
Material status		
Single	124	40.70
Married	169	55.40
Others	12	3.90
Years of employment		
1-6 Years	6	2
7-12 years	25	8.2
13-8 years	58	19
19 years and above	216	70.80

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive statistics are first presented. The overall mean value of the PsyCap and burnout are shown in Tables 2 and 3, followed by the Pearson correlation for relationship testing at $p = 0.05$ in Table 4.

Descriptive Statistics

The majority of participants were female (36.2%). Most had a Bachelor’s degree (88.8%) and are from ground service and technical departments (36.8%). The respondents mostly had an employment experience with the company around 6-10 years (28.9%).

Table 2

The Overall Mean Vale of PsyCap

	Mean	SD
Self-efficacy	3.03	0.76
Hope	3.81	0.69
Optimism	4.00	0.58
Resilience	4.07	0.56
ALL PsyCap	3.73	0.50
Total (N)	305	

Table 3

The Overall Mean Vale of Burnout

	Mean	SD
Emotional exhaustion	2.87	0.89
Depersonalisation	1.61	0.71
Lack of personalefficacy	1.82	0.68
All burnout	2.10	0.63
Total (N)	305	

Table 4

Correlation Between PsyCap and Burnout

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Self-efficacy	1								
2. Hope	0.43**	1							
3. Optimism	0.36**	0.63**	1						
4. Resilience	0.25*	0.54*	0.57*	1					
5. All psycap	0.70*	0.85*	0.81*	0.73*	1				
6. Exhaustion	-0.22**	-0.36**	-0.36**	-0.30**	-0.40**	1			
7. Depersonalisation	-0.04*	-0.16**	-0.24**	-0.23**	-0.21**	0.44**	1		
8. Lack of personal efficacy	-0.25**	-0.36**	-0.39**	-0.37**	-0.44**	0.62**	0.69**	1	
9. All burnout	-0.21**	-0.36**	-0.40**	-0.35**	-0.42**	0.85**	0.80**	0.89**	1

Notes. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). $N = 305$.

Among Thai flight attendants, the results indicate that the average level of PsyCap is moderately strong ($\bar{X} = 3.73$), whilst the overall mean value of burnout is low ($\bar{X} = 2.10$).

Correlations

Table 4 presents the result of the Pearson correlation used to test the relationship between each component

of PsyCap and burnout among Thai airways flight attendants. The category that correlated the highest was “Optimism and Lack of Personal Efficacy” ($r = -0.39$) followed by “Resilience and Lack of Personal Efficacy” ($r = -0.37$), “Hope and Exhaustion” ($r = -0.36$), and “Optimism and Exhaustion” ($r = -0.36$). The correlation between an aggregate PsyCap and Burnout was also negative related ($r = -0.42$). Thus, the hypothesis for this study is supported.

Discussion

The result presented a high moderate level of PsyCap ($mean = 3.73$) among Thai airways flight attendants. Interestingly, most of the participants were female and they had a long service of employment. It could be interpreted that the employees of this company may not have intention to leave.

The result illustrates that the employees rated their burnout with the low value ($mean = 2.10$). Possible explanations that were raised for these findings are the effects of employees’ individual characteristics (e.g., demographics). It can be explained that flight attendants with longer service years have deeper feeling of commitment with the job and the organisation and that could reveal a positive feeling about their job as they have ability to conceal negative emotions and hold high hospitality skill, which is an indication of professionalism and personal strength. Also, various environmental factors on psychological outcomes of emotion labours, such as personality traits could have an effect on the level of burnout among the Thai flight attendants.

Optimism received the highest correlated score compared to other elements of PsyCap; it may explain that the consequences of the tiring nature of flight attendants’ working environment have made the flight attendants often interpret events they face negatively, and this could become a permanent way to perceive events while providing service. In addition, the negative relationship between PsyCap and Burnout perhaps it appears that from the perspective of both the flight attendants and the airlines on reducing the level of burnout could be done through developing a PsyCap by encouraging and assisting the flight attendants in performing genuine and deep acting. In addition, the airline may come up with policies in order to help the flight attendants of how to behave when they encounter such difficult situations. As the nature of the airlines work that most of the time flight attendants need to contact with their customers, therefore, problems and challenges may occur unexpectedly based on differently situations. It could make sense that airlines seek for suitable persons with high level of PsyCap to perform this role as they are likely to handle uncomfortable situations on their own, for the purpose of increasing their sense of control and commitment, and consequently their job satisfaction (Spence Laschinger, Leiter, Day, & Gilin, 2009)

Limitation and Future Research

This study is limited only one particular company, therefore, the result might not be able to be generalised. Future research perhaps conduct a replicated study with other Thai airlines companies or does a comparative study between Thai base and non-Thai base airline organisations. Additionally, this study was a first step to get more understanding of the current level of PsyCap and burnout among Thai flight attendants. For future study, we suggest adopting more advance analysis to investigate the impact by using more complex statistical technique so that we could acquire deeper understanding of the situation, and ultimately the organisation may use the result to guide their applicable practice.

Conclusion

This study presents the average value of PsyCap and burnout among the Thai flight attendants. In light of the above discussion, human resources are an important contribution to competitive advantage for today's organisations. The contributions of PsyCap deserve attention as it can be developed and managed to affect desired performance outcomes in productivity, customer service, and retention, which caused by the experience of burnout.

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