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Service Innovative Behavior in the Aviation Industry: An Empirical Study of the Contribution of Perceived Organizational Support

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Abstract
This research study aims to investigate the extent to which perceived organizational support shapes extra-role behaviors in performing daily tasks in the airline industry. Unlike most previous studies on this topic, which mainly focus on the organizational level, the focus in this study is on the individual level. To test the hypothesis, a questionnaire, surveyed 233 flight attendants from several Vietnamese airlines. Data was analyzed by employing structural equation model. The findings indicate that flight attendants' perceived organizational support enhances work engagement and that both have a significant positive significant effect on affective commitment. It was also found that affective commitment engenders innovative behaviors in terms of service quality. Moreover, perceived organizational support has a direct effect on service innovative behavior support. The empirical results and the managerial implications discussed contribute to the literature on flight attendant behavior.

Keywords: Aviation**,** Affective Commitment, Perceived Organizational Support, Service Innovative Behavior, Work Engagement

1. Introduction

Innovation has been one of the key factors in ensuring the sustainable growth of the aviation sector in the face of a constantly changing global market (Franke, 2007). Innovative activities in the airline industry include, among others, building innovative policies, (Andrew, 2012), developing innovative business models (Schneider, Spieth, & Clauss, 2013), and embracing the advances of modern technology (Lee & Mo, 2011). The successful implementation of innovative strategies in the airline industry is often premised on the ability of flight attendants to deliver on these strategies and on the quality of the service as they are the image of the airline (Hochschild, 1983). However, it is not unusual for them not to meet the "innovative" demands placed on them as they work long hours (both daytime and nighttime) in a stressful environment (Lee & Huyn, 2016). This limits their innovative performance (Cheng, Hong, & Yang, 2018).

Yet, it is well established that for an organization to perform well and consistently deliver satisfaction to its customer, it is necessary for its employees to go beyond their daily routine and contribute an extra something to the organization (Katz, 1964). With regard to the airline industry and the input of flight attendants, a number of scholars have sought to clarify which factors can lead to their out-role behavior. Lee and Huyn (2016), for example, determined that flight attendants with high psychological capital tend to show more work engagement and

better service behavior. In addition to work engagement, it has also been suggested that employees who are committed to their organization will be more likely to be innovative in the workplace. (Xerri & Brunetto, 2013). This is precisely the psychological process addressed by the organizational support theory, on the one hand, and perceived organizational support, on the other (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In particular, the impact of perceived organizational support on service innovative behavior gains has been receiving much attention by scholars (Afsar & Badir, 2017; Bani-Melhem, Zeffane, & Albaity, 2018; Qi et al., 2019). They mainly focus on investigating the mechanism of perceived organizational support and its relation to out-role behaviors via felt obligation and on looking at the fulfillment of socio- emotional needs to name a few of the issues explored (Baran, Shanock, & Miller, 2012). Few studies, however, focus on how perceived organizational support affects innovative behavior. This is precisely why this issue is at the core of this study.

Specifically, focusing on flight attendants, the purpose of this study is to provide a holistic model for perceived organizational support, work engagement (felt obligation effect), employees' commitment (effect of fulfilling socio-emotional needs), and service innovative behavior. It aims to fill a gap in past research, all the wider as few studies deal with these issues in the context of the airline industry and flight attendants in particular. Therefore, it is these authors' expectations that this study will contribute to helping airlines enhance the innovative behavior of their employees as part of the companies' efforts to increase customer service quality and ensure the sustainability of their operations.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

- Perceived Organizational Support and Work Engagement

Perceived organizational support has been defined as "the employees' beliefs regarding the extent to which organizations assess their contributions and care for their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1986, p. 501). Caring agents from the organization are often considered at the organizational level rather than at the individual level (Levinson, 1965). According to Levison (1965), their actions include among others organizational policies, norms, and the organizational culture. Employees view the characteristics of their organization and the way their organization treats them as a clear indication of whether the organization favors or disfavors them (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Organizations can use social support to enhance work engagement (Llorens et al., 2006). When employees perceive that the organization supports them, they tend to immerse themselves in their objectives at work (Yongxing et al., 2017). Eisenberger and Stinglhammer (2011) also argued that when an organization invests in the interest of its employees (e.g., value employees' contributions), then work engagement will be increased. Therefore, the following hypotheses can be developed:

H_1: *Perceived organizational support is positively related to work engagement*

- Work Engagement and Affective Commitment

Employees in the airline industry often have to deal with difficult situations such as, for example, arrogant or aggressive passengers, that require much effort on their part to handle them appropriately. This can lead to stress or burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Chen & Kao, 2012). Work engagement can thus be defined as a psychological contract for flight attendants to overcome struggles for ensuring service performance (Yeh & Hong, 2012). As determined by Schaudeli et al. (2002), work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor translates into a high level of energy and desire to devote time and effort to complete tasks. Moreover, employees who are dedicated to their jobs experience feelings such as enthusiasm, pride, inspiration, and so on. As to absorption, it refers to the immersive experience that employees get when they are working; time passes rapidly and it is impossible for them to disconnect from

the task. Employees who have a high level of work engagement tend to immerse themselves in their work (Schaudeli et al., 2002).

According to the motivational process of the Job Demand-Resource model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), the increased likelihood of completing the tasks successfully induces a feeling of fulfillment in employees that boosts their work engagement. Schaufeli and Taris (2014) found that work engagement generates a motivated and positive state of mind in employees. It also has a positive effect on affective commitment (Gokul, Sridevi, & Srinivasan, 2012; Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011; Scrima et al., 2014). Based on the above, the following hypotheses is proposed:

H_2: *Work engagement is positively related to affective commitment*

- Perceived Organizational Support and Affective Commitment

In their theory of social exchange, Eisenberger et al. (1986) suggested that organizational commitment relates to the perception by employees of the level of commitment of the organization to them. Some of the relevant literature divides organizational commitment into 3 types: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment (Meyer, Allen, & Gellatly, 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993). According to Eisenberger et al. (1986), affective commitment is the most significant form of commitment. Meyer and Allen (1991) defined it as the emotions of employees that express their feelings of attachment, identification, and involvement with their organization's activities. When employees perceive a high level of organizational support, they will "repay" their organization with affective commitment. Many organizations support and value employees' contribution to increasing their attachment to the organization (O'Driscoll & Randall, 1999). This study focuses on affective commitment since perceived organizational support is positively related to changes in affective commitment over time.

Rhoades, Eisenberger, and Armeli (2001) provided evidence that it contributes to affective commitment in that employees turn the support they receive from the organization into emotional attachment with the organization. Saks (2006) and Gokul et al. (2012) confirmed the strong relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement with affective commitment. Several studies were also conducted in Asia. Focusing on Korean employees, Lee and Peccei (2006) found that perceived organizational support has a strong and direct effect on affective commitment. This result was confirmed by Liu and Chang (2009) who studied expatriates in mainland China. Therefore, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H_3: *Perceived organizational support is positively related to affective commitment*

- Affective Commitment and Service Innovative Behavior

Lee and Huyn (2016) defined service innovative behavior as the willingness to propose innovative ideas that convince customers of the enhanced service quality. Service innovative behavior has been playing an important role in the airline industry. This is because it promotes creativity with regard to decision-making and is service-oriented. Bettencourt and Brown (1997) determined that service behavior involves the action, voice, and attitude of frontline employees serving customers. This is why service behavior is regarded as a symbol of organizational service quality (Farrell, Souchon, & Durden, 2001). Affective commitment, as defined above, is positively related to work engagement, which, in turn, is positively associated with innovative work behavior, feedback seeking for self-improvement, and error reporting (Chughtai, 2011). When employees demonstrate commitment and receive feedback from the organization, generally the work environment becomes safer and employees tend to be more resourceful, which may in turn enhance employees' innovativeness (Amabile, 1996). The following hypotheses can thus be developed:

H_4: *Affective commitment is positively related to service innovative behavior*

- Perceived Organizational Support and Service Innovative Behavior

Employees can have creative ideas and will often explore possible opportunities to solve current and future problems. In short, when they perceive that the organization shows concern, offers nonjudgmental and honest feedback about their work, and supports their actions, their innovative output is likely to increase (Gregory, Albritton, & Osmonbekov, 2010). This argument is at the root of the social exchange theory discussed earlier (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Recall from above that the thrust of it is that employees who perceive high levels of perceived organizational support are more likely to feel it is part of their duty to care for the organization's development and help it achieve its goals. Specifically, employees who perceive strong organizational support experience a better needs-supplies fit, and exhibit increased creativity (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016). Conversely, when employees perceive low support from the organization, their involvement in innovation is likely to be lessened (Bos-Nehles & Veenendaal, 2017). Based on these findings, we propose the following hypotheses:

H_5: *Perceived organizational support is positively related to service innovative behavior*

Figure 1 shows the research model developed to explore the relationships between the four operative constructs used in this study, namely, perceived organizational support, work engagement, affective commitment, and service innovative behavior.

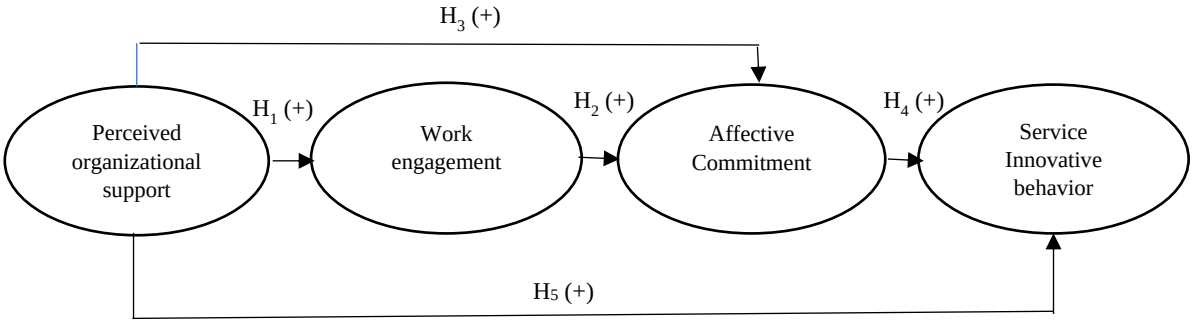

Figure 1: Research Model.

3. Research Methodology

This study gathered information from flight attendants working for three Vietnamese airlines, namely Vietnam Airlines, Vietjet Air, and Bamboo Airways. Because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the airline industry, they have been spending a lot of time at home, which made reaching them for this survey easy. The snowball sampling process was used to pick out flight attendants (Hendricks & Blanken, 1992). Participants who took part in the survey were recruited using Google Form. In total, 233 valid questionnaires were answered during the period May-June 2020.

Questions related to perceived organizational support were adopted from Eisenberger et al. (1986). They consisted of six items such as, for example, "My organization really cares about my well-being". The nine-item questions on work engagement were a shortened version adapted from Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006) and included questions such as "At work, I feel I am bursting with energy". Affective commitment was assessed via a six-item scale developed from Meyer and Allen (1997), Mowday, Steers, & Porter, L. W. (1979), and Rhoades et al., (2001). One question, for example, was "I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization". Finally, to assess Service innovative behavior among the respondents, a six-

item scale adapted from Hu, Horng, & Sun (2009) was developed. It included questions such as, for example, "At work, I sometimes come up with innovative and creative ideas".

All measurements were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). After it was translated into English by the authors, the questionnaire was reviewed by an expert in the field from Vietnam Aviation Academy and then translated back into English to ensure that there were no discrepancies between the two versions (Mullen, 1995). The valid responses show an almost equal gender balanced (males 43.3%; females 53.6%). Most of the respondents are under 30 years old (83.7%) and well over half of then hold 2-year and 4-year degrees (71.7%). The majority of them have been working in the industry for less than 3 years (74.7%) and a high proportion of respondents are cabin attendants (78.5%). The rest of them are assistant pursers and pursers (21.5%).

4. Results

- Measurements

Measurements of the models were carried out by performing confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) (Tabachnick, & Fidell, 2001). A good fit was found between the hypothesized four-factor model and the data ($\chi 2/df$ = 1.551; TLI = 0. 972; CFI = 0. 977; SRMR = 0. 035; RMSEA = 0. 049). The hypothesized model has a better fit than other alternative models, which include the three-factor model collapsing perceived organizational support and work engagement ($\chi 2/df$ = 2.234; TLI =0.932; CFI =0. 943; SRMR =0. 051; RMSEA =0.076); the two-factor model collapsing perceived organizational support, work engagement, and affective commitment ($\chi 2/df$ = 2.721; TLI =0.911; CFI =0.926; SRMR =0.055; RMSEA =0.086); and the one-factor model by loading all variables on a single factor ($\chi 2/df$ =4.217; TLI =0.834; CFI =0.861; SRMR =0.075; RMSEA =0.118)

As shown in Table 1, the Composite reliability of the proposal model ranges from 0.92 (perceived organizational support) to 0.95 (service innovative behavior), which is over the 0.7 threshold (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The average variance extracted is also greater than the 0.5 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and ranges from 0.66 (perceived organizational support) to 0.76 (service innovative behavior). These findings confirms the validity of the study framework's constructs and scales.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix and Average Variance Extracted

Sample	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	CR	AVE
N=233	1. Age	26.40	.76	…										
	2. Gender	1.49	.55	-.42	…									
	3. Education	2.53	.90	.32**	-.32	…								
	4. Tenure	1.87	1.0	.71**	.12**	.23**	…							
	5. Job position	1.41	.79	.62**	.02	.18**	.66**	…						
	6. Work engagement	4.37	.68	-.22**	-.09	-.21**	-.28**	-.28**	**.84**				.93	.70
	7. Service innovative behavior	3.89	.89	-.18**	.15*	-.19**	-.24**	-.17**	.71	**.87**			.95	.76
	8. Perceived organizational support	3.82	.97	-.32**	-.08	-.21**	-.43**	-.38**	.77	.69	**.81**		.92	.66
	9. Affective commitment	4.21	.82	-.29**	-.03	-.21**	-.35**	-.35**	.86	.71	.78	**.82**	.93	.68

CR= Composite reliability; AVE=Average variance extracted; *p<0.05; **p<0.001

- *Hypotheses Testing*

As can be seen in Table 2, the results from the analysis of the sample show a good fit with the proposed framework ($\chi 2/df$ = 1.567; TLI = 0.971; CFI = 0.976; RMSEA = 0.49).

Table 2: Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Description of Path	β	SE	t Values	Result
H_1	POS → Work engagement	.773***	.040	*10.33*	Supported
H_2	Work engagement → Affective commitment	.649***	.132	*8.09*	Supported
H_3	POS → Affective commitment	.280***	.062	*3.98*	Supported
H_4	Affective commitment → Service innovative behavior	.438***	.094	*4.89*	Supported
H_5	POS → Service innovative behavior	.358***	.083	*3.96*	Supported

***p < 0.001

H_1 predicted that perceived organizational support could enhance flight attendants' work engagement. The results show that perceived organizational support has a significant positive effect on work engagement (*coefficient=.773, t-statistic= 10.33, p<0.001).* As to H_2 and H_3, they predicted that flight attendants' perceived organizational support and work engagement have a positive effect on their affective commitment. The results support H_2 and H_3. Both perceived organizational support and work engagement have a significant positive effect on affective commitment (*H_2 coefficient=.649, t-statistic= 8.09, p<0.001; H_3 coefficient=.280, t-statistic=3.98, p<0.001*). H_4 predicted that when flight attendants have affective commitment, they tend to behave in innovative ways that bring benefits in terms of service quality. The results show that affective commitment positively affects service innovative behavior (*coefficient= .438, t-statistic=4.89, p<0.001).* Finally, H_5 surmised that perceived organizational support not only affects service innovative behavior via work engagement and affective but has a direct effect on service innovative behavior. The result confirmed H_5. Perceived organizational support significantly affects service innovative behavior (*coefficient=.358; t-statistic=3.96, p<0.001*). Figure 2 shows the relationship between the variables.

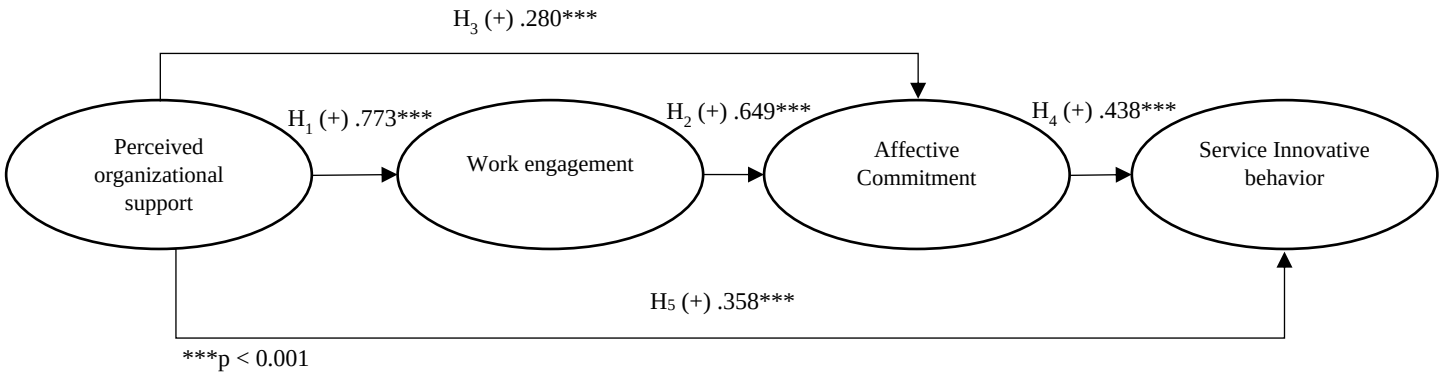

Figure 2: Model Results.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study will add to the body of literature on service innovative behavior, in particular about the relationship with perceived organizational support. It establishes a holistic model for perceived organizational support, work engagement, affective commitment, and service innovative behavior in the airline sector, all areas that have not been extensively examined in the past as noted earlier. The findings provide evidence that primarily applies to the airline industry but may also be extended to other sectors. While a number of previous studies found a close link between employees' psychological capital and their innovative behavior (e.g. Brunetto et al., 2013; Lee & Hyun, 2016; Schaufeli, 2012), the psychological processes leading to innovative behaviors, especially in the field of aviation, has not been widely studied. It is well established that creative behaviors are levers that help organizations overcome difficulties, especially with regard to the current pandemic situation (Serrano & Kazda, 2020). The results confirmed the role of work engagement and affective commitment in the relationship between perceived organizational support and service innovative behavior. This leads to the following remarks.

First, the generally stressful working environment in the aviation industry, one in which employees often struggle to remain engaged in their job as they are on night shift and/or work long hours, can lead to negative emotions that in turn may affect flight safety (e.g., work loneliness, work-family conflicts) (Öge, Cetin, & Top, 2018). Support from airlines in the form of non-financial benefits therefore could help employees overcome those negative feelings and engage even more in their work while aboard. As Öge et al., (2018) and Wright (2005) argued, a supporting, loving, and harmonious working environment can emotionally engage individuals in their job and cause them to have an emotional attachment to their organization.

Second, consistent with Öge et al. (2018) and Wright (2005), this study found that in the airline industry, perceived organizational support and work engagement can boost the affective commitment of flight attendants. That said, with the Covid-19 pandemic and the changing working environment that has ensued, the job commitment of flight attendants has become a topic of concern for scholars (Bajrami et al., 2021; Shin, Lee, & Hur, 2021; Singh, 2020). This makes organizational support more critical than ever and one of the best ways to ensure that flight attendants can overcome Covid-19-induced on-the-job anxiety. This is precisely what the social exchange theory advocates (Eisenberger et al., 1986). When employees feel psychologically safe, it generally happens because of perceived organizational support. This makes employees more inclined to make extra efforts and more emotionally attached to their daily tasks.

Third, with the pandemic, the number of flights operating daily has dramatically dropped, causing may airline employees to be furloughed or simply terminated (Sohn et al., 2020). However, with the prospect of seeing the spread of the virus coming under control thanks to worldwide vaccination, the post-Covid-19 new normal is looming on the horizon and with it the return of passengers. Competition though will be fiercer than ever as pre-Covid-19 level of passengers are not expected to return until 2024. If airlines want to maintain their competitive advantage, this will require employees to go the extra step and be willing to perform tasks that may not be included in their job description (e.g. sanitary seating arrangements may continue to be enforced by authorities). This in turn will require the caring and support of airlines and a willingness to consider employees' suggestions, no matter how bold, regarding new ways of providing service. Employees who feel that their organization is on their "side" (e.g., willing to listen to new methods) are far more likely to spend time helping their employers improve customer service while not incurring higher costs at a time of financial stress.

As a frontline team, flight attendants indeed can directly convey the organization's message to passengers. This is in line with a number of scholars who have determined that employees who feel positive emotions in their work will “repay” their organization by extra-role behaviors such as innovative ideas, organizational citizenship behaviors, etc. (Afsar & Badir, 2017; Bani-Melhem et al., 2018; Qi et al., 2019).

- *Managerial Implications*

The findings in this study help us better understand the psychological process of flight attendants and how organizational care might influence service innovation behavior. From a managerial perspective, the following suggestions can therefore be made:

The more organizational support, the greater the level of participation and engagement of flight attendants the tasks assigned to them. To begin with, airlines must be concerned with labor policies. Non-monetary advantages, such as income distribution equality, shifts, breaks, workgroup organization, and employee feedback channels, should be addressed as part of a constructive dialogue and a way of showing organizational support. Airlines should also address the issue of the communication and conflict resolution capabilities of supervisors, in particular those who interact directly with flight attendants and are therefore responsible for concretizing the organization's employee support policy. The image of the organization is reflected in part through them. If flight attendants feel they are supported at work, in particular by their direct supervisors, they will immerse themselves in the operations of the company and will most likely harbor positive feelings such as wanting to stay with the company. A positive behavior will also make them more proactive at work and ready to contribute to the organization's operations by providing new ideas and innovative methods of operation.

Secondly, airlines may consider adopting measures tailored to long-term employees and those in high positions. In the context of the present epidemic, their valuable experience and knowledge of the industry is critical for airlines as they seek to gain a competitive edge. Furthermore, they are part of the teams who will train future generations of employees and help airlines achieve long-term expansion while addressing market obstacles. In doing so, policymakers should keep in mind the importance of balancing the preferred policies of certain groups with organizational discrimination. When modifying rules in the organization, it is therefore preferable to solicit employees' feedback in order to reach a mutual agreement and avoid undermining other employees' perceptions of the organization's support for them.

Finally, airlines may consider holding an annual meeting designed to collect feedback from flight attendants on current policies in order to amend and correct ineffective elements, if any. Apart from sending a strong signal that the company does care about its employees’ input, allowing workers to contribute to individual welfare policies encourages them to participate more in the organization's operations and boosts their capacity to work harder. In addition, publicly commenting on the organization’s operations will enhance the relationship between leadership and employees, foster common knowledge inside the airline, and serve as a platform for the airline to design, among other benefits, welfare services for flight attendants.

- *Limitations and Future Research Directions*

This study has some limitations. First, we analyzed data from cross-sectional groups. Longitudinal studies are therefore necessary to reduce bias and discover other relationships (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

Second, our study focused on the airline industry, which was used to get insights on the relationship between perceived organizational support and innovative behavior among employees, in this case flight attendants. The proposed research model should be expanded to other service industries or compare the same industry in other countries.

Third, future studies should explore other psychological factors (e.g., psychological empowerment, perceived supervisor support) to better understand the psychological process of service innovative behavior.

Fourth, Vietnamese culture is rooted in Confucian philosophy (Jia, 2016), which means that the behavior of employees is shaped by the organizational climate and their supervisors. Future study could revisit the framework in another context.

Finally, flight attendants are organized as groups. Since the characteristics of a group may affect their outcome behavior, further research could examine the characteristics of cabin crew from a perspective such as, for example, group diversity (Long Nguyen, Huong Nguyen, & Ho, 2021), cultural intelligence (Seriwatana & Charoensukmongkol, 2020) under the support of the organization and its outcome behavior.

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