THE EFFECTS OF AIRLINE HOSPITALITY ON THE ATTITUDE OF FULL-SERVICE AIRLINE PASSENGERS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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To cite this document:
Mohamed, M., & Zainol, Z. (2017). The Effects of Airline Hospitality on the Attitude of Full-Service Airline Passengers: A Preliminary Study. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment Management (JTHEM), 2(4)*, 1-11.
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Abstract: This study aims to identify the influence of perceived airline hospitality on passenger's attitude. Data were gathered from a purposive sample of 200 full-service airline passengers using self-administered questionnaires. Regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. The findings suggest that positive evaluation of airline hospitality has significant and positive influences on the passengers' attitude towards the airline within the context of full-service airline. The outcome of this study provides airline service management with a new and useful insight on how to well manage the passenger's in-flight experience and serves as a point of departure to the researchers in the field of hospitality and airline services.

Keywords: Airline hospitality, attitude, full-service airlines, preliminary, regression.

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Introduction

Air transport serves as an important role in today's life (Baumeister & Onkila, 2017). Through its speed, reach and reliability, it makes domestic and international destinations reachable as well as satisfying the needs of passengers in terms of convenience and timeliness (Charoensettasilp & Wu, 2013). However, with the various airline companies available in the market, passengers have more choices in terms of airlines, airfares and itineraries (Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Martin, Roman & Espino, 2008; Wen & Lai, 2010). This contributes to low ticket prices and customers increasingly giving preference to airlines (Gures et al., 2011), which in turn raises the degree of competition among airline companies. In today's experience-based economy, it has been raised that to achieve competitive advantage in the

airline industry, the passengers' in-flight experience should be increased. This is because, the in-flight experience or the journey itself is something exceptional for the passenger (Archana & Subha, 2012; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Ahn, Kim & Hyun, 2015) and can effect their choice of airline, emotions, feeling, satisfaction and loyalty with the airline services (Ahn et al. 2017; Archana & Subha, 2012; Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2010).

Based on past literatures, in-flight experience comprised of several dimensions (Kim, Kim & Hyun, 2016) and cabin crew's performance that can be described in terms of hospitableness of cabin crew's performance is one of the dimensions that can create a memorable service experience to passengers (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012; Lashley & Morrison, 2000; Mansour & Ariffin, 2016; Nameghi & Ariffin, 2013). It also effectively works as a competitive advantage to the firms (Ariffin, Nameghi & Khakizadeh, 2013). That is because with the various airline companies offering the same basic service, passengers might use cabin crew's hosting quality or cabin crew's in-flight hospitality as a point of distinguishing airline services and as a key determinant to the success and survival of the airline companies (Ahn et al., 2015; Kim et al. 2016; Kim & Park 2014; Nameghi & Ariffin, 2013). In other words, unsatisfied in-flight experience such as inhospitableness of cabin crew's performance may lead the passengers to not only reconsider their choice for the next flights, but will possibly switch to a different airline without difficulty (Archana & Subha, 2012; Li, Qiu & Liu, 2016). As a result, passenger's loyalty towards airline's brand and firm's profit will decreased.

Although previous studies have recognized the significance of hospitality in the commercial setting, they however concentrated mainly on the antecedents of passenger expectations towards airline hospitality (e.g. Nameghi 2013a) and hotel hospitality (e.g. Ariffin et al. 2013; Ariffin & Maghzi 2012) as well as the consequences of hospitality in the context of hotels and restaurants (e.g. Ariffin & Aziz 2012; Ariffin 2013; Ariffin, Nameghi, & Soon, 2015; Kucukergin & Dedeoglu 2014) and cultural heritage tourism (Mansour & Ariffin, 2016). Very few studies have been conducted to understand the influence of hospitality in the airline industry (Nameghi 2013a). Additionally, while there are numbers of studies on customer service experience in the context of airline services (e.g. Chang & Yeh 2002; Gilbert & Wong 2003; Pakdil & Aydin 2007; Forgas et al. 2010; Nameghi 2013(a)(b); Nameghi & Ariffin 2013), almost none specifically addresses the influence of cabin crew in-flight hospitality on passenger's attitude towards the airline. It is the most important issue this study seeks to address and consequently contributes to the existing knowledge in hospitality and airline services.

It is therefore to bridge the gap and shed light on cabin crew's performance, this study would focus on the in-flight hospitality of the airline industry. Specifically, the main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between perceived airline hospitality and passenger's attitude in the context of full-service airline services. Hospitality in this study is defined as the type of cabin crew's hosting behaviour that focuses on convivial and personalised services with the aim of providing psychological comfort to passengers (Nameghi & Ariffin 2013). Meanwhile, attitude is defined as a person's learned predisposition to react to an object or stimulus in a consistently favourable or unfavourable way (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

It is expected that the findings of this study will provide a full in-depth explanation of the roles of perceived hospitality in the formation of passenger's attitudes towards airlines. In an increasingly competitive airline industry, it is also hoped that the findings of this study can help airlines companies to develop better strategies to improve their in-flight services.

By employing the new measurement scale proposed by Nameghi and Ariffin (2013) to measure in-flight hospitality, it is expected that this study can support the validity and reliability of the scale for future airline studies.

Literature Review

Airline Hospitality

Up to now, most of the extant research into hospitality was conducted in the social and private context. However, in recent years, the concept of hospitality has been perceived as pertinent to the commercial settings. The significance of hospitality framework is increasingly important in commercial industries due to its ability to offer better understanding of the dynamic nature of the exchange experience between host and guests. As highlighted by Nameghi (2013a), hospitality-centric excellence is theoretically considered a new kind of excellence beyond service quality or service excellence. Service excellence must be performed prior to achieving hospitality excellence (Severt et al., 2008; Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012). Due to that, hospitality is considered as a different, but related construct to service quality (Nameghi, 2013a). Along similar line, Narayan, Rajendran, and Sai (2008) asserted hospitality as a service quality dimensions that has a significant impact on satisfaction.

In the limited number of past studies on the concept of airline hospitality, most researchers have applied the determinant of service quality in the airline industry as a benchmark to conceptualize the criteria of airline hospitality (Nameghi, 2013a). While service is the technical performance of a task, hospitality is the attitude or style in which tasks are performed (Smith, 1994).

Hospitality is a relevant concept in different service contexts (Nameghi, 2013a). Indeed, hospitality in terms of employee responsiveness, courtesy, personal attentions plays an important role as a central component in distinguishing service providers (Kim et al., 2016; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Nameghi, 2013a). Nameghi (2013a) adds that the concept of hospitality is wide; it covers not only hotels, restaurants and commercial accommodation but also the transportation service industries, including the airline industry. The role of hospitality in the airline industry has become more important because airlines are a "people processing service" that involves extensive interaction between passengers and cabin crews (Ahn et al. 2017: Nibkin et al. 2016). The interactions between these two parties are more likely to affect passengers' perceptions of the airline (Gursoy, Chen & Kim, 2005; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017), which they will remember for a long.

One of the earliest works relating to scale development in the field of airline hospitality in tourism belongs to Nameghi and Ariffin (2013). The airline hospitality scale, which is referred to as AirHos scale in Nameghi and Ariffin's study was developed in several steps and was derived mainly from concepts circulated by Churchill (1979). Nameghi and Ariffin (2013) have used the AirHos scale to assess full-service airline services in Malaysia. A four-factor model of hospitality focusing on cabin crews is employed to clarify the dimensionality of hospitality in the provision of full-service airline hospitality, confined to in-flight services. The four distinctive but interconnected dimensions arranged in the order of their importance are courtesy, appreciation, socializing and comfort.

Airline Hospitality and Attitude
Based on past literature, the host employees' performance or quality of host-guest relationship plays an important role in the customer's perception and evaluation of service (Berry, 2000; Nguyen, 2006; Gursoy et al., 2005; Han, Hyun and Kim, 2014; Li et al. 2016; Suess & Mody 2017). That is, a host employee who is presenting appropriate behaviour and manner of treatment towards their guest such as politeness, helpfulness and warmth is anticipated to encourage the guest's favourable attitude and satisfaction (Kim et al. 2016). Han et al. (2014) for example mentioned that excellence service performance significantly influence airline passenger's favourable attitude and their positive evaluation of air travel experiences. Similarly, Ahn et al. (2017) also claimed that cabin crew's service performance can enhance passengers' perception of airline services and their overall experience with the flight. Impolite or inattentive employees' performance may encourage the customer to share their unpleasant experience with others such as through posting a negative service reviews on company website, terminate their purchase with the service providers as well as switch to other service providers (Li et al. 2016).

Specifically, in an airline hospitality study, it was stated that the cabin crew's behaviour and manner of treatment have an impact on passengers' comfortable, relaxing and enjoyable experience on the flight (Nameghi, 2013a). In other words, it is inferred in this study that passengers who perceive that the cabin crew is hospitable through making eye contact when communicating with them, spending time with them and wishing them a friendly goodbye when they are about to leave the aircraft will perceive their travelling experience with the airline as being comfortable, pleasant and enjoyable.

Furthermore, Teng and Chang (2013) and Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) claimed that the appropriate hosting quality can cultivate the guest's psychological comfort via host-guest interactions, which in turn improves guests' positive affective responses or good impression. Therefore, it is believed that a guest who perceived that the host employee was being hospitable through demonstrating authentic smile, feelings of generosity and being friendly will regard their service experience as being joyful, honoured and memorable.

Based on the review of literature, it is thus suggested that positive evaluation of the hospitality leads to positive attitudes towards the airline. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Perceived airline hospitality is positively related to attitude.

Research Method

Research Framework
Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework proposed in this study. The conceptual framework presented in this study is built upon reasoned action theory (TRA) as well as based on the aforementioned discussion and hypothesis. It represents the direct relationship between airline hospitality and passenger's attitude towards the airline. Specifically, this study anticipated that cabin crew's hosting quality plays a significant role to create enjoyable and pleasant in-flight experience to passengers' of full service airlines.
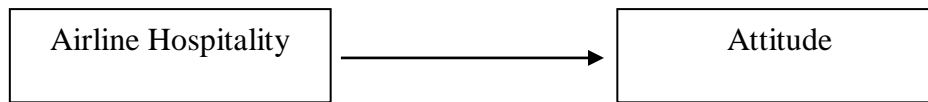
Figure 1: The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Sample

This study only selected passengers of full-service airlines operating in Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), Malaysia. The respondents particularly had experiences flying to international destinations within the last 12 months. This study choosed airline industry as a context of study due to several reasons. First, the interaction between the customer and service personnel in the airline industry is very extensive. Thus, customers' perceptions of service delivery processes offer various opportunities for them to evaluate hospitality hosting behaviour. Second, the service is one of the most competitive elements in the airline industry and particularly in international airline (Banff, 1992). Third, as mentioned before, less studies have been conducted on the effect of hospitality in the airline industry (Nameghi, 2013a).

Measures

This study has used a structured questionnaire that measures the aspects of airline hospitality and passengers' attitude.

The measurement for airline hospitality (10 items) were adopted from Nameghi (2013a). All items for all variables were measured on a six-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Some of the measurement items for airline hospitality are; *the cabin crew displayed natural smiling faces almost all the time, the cabin crew always maintained eye contact with the passenger during conversation; the cabin crew offered warm welcome to all passengers; the cabin crew made their best efforts to ensure that all passengers enjoy their meals; and the cabin crew wished all passengers friendly goodbye.*

Attitude was measured using five statements adapted from Sparks and Pan (2009), who reported the Cronbach's alpha reliability for this scale to be 0.95. All items for all variables were measured on a six-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Specifically, passengers' attitude towards the airline was measured using the statement such as, a*ll things considered, traveling with this airline was an enjoyable/ good/ pleasant/ fun/ favourable experience.*

Lastly, demographic profiles and background information of respondents were collected using five questions listed as gender, age, educational level, occupation and income level.

Data Collection

Once a letter of permission to conduct this study was obtained from the management of Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), a self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the targeted respondents within the four days permitted by the management of KLIA in June 2015. Specifically, the actual data collection was conducted from 25th to 28th June 2015 (from 9.00 am to 6.00pm). Since the targeted respondents or data of this study should come from individual airline passengers who have experienced flying to international destinations using full-service airlines within the last 12 months up until the data collection time, purposive sampling technique was used. Purposive sampling is limited to specific types of individuals or group of respondents who can provide the desired information. They are selected either as

they are the only ones who have the information needed by researcher, or they comply with several criteria specified by the researcher (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

To collect the data, the questionnaires were personally given to the respondents while they were waiting for their international departure at the Satellite Building in KLIA. Specifically, data were collected at waiting lounges near departure gates. Once completed, the questionnaires were collected. To increase response rate and to show appreciation for the respondent's willingness to be involved in the present study (Lee & Lings 2008; Zikmund et al. 2010), a small token of appreciation was handed to the respondents either before or after they completed the questionnaires.

Data Analysis
With the use of the SPSS version 21.0 software, descriptive and regression analysis were performed to analyze a total of 200 responses collected from the survey. In particular, to describe the demographic profile of the sample, descriptive analysis through frequencies distributions and percentages were conducted to compute each of the demographic items. Mean and standard deviations were calculated for the 15 survey items associated with perceptions of airline hospitality and passenger's attitude. Lastly, regression analysis was used to test the hypothesized relationship in the proposed model and to reach a conclusion about a population from a sample.

Research Findings

Respondent Profile
Table 1 summarizes the profile of the respondents. Based on the Table, 56.5 percent of the respondents were female and another 43.5percent were male. About 63 percent of the respondents were aged between 20 and 39. The statistics shows that more than half of the respondents (65.5%) had bachelor degree and postgraduate degree. Of the respondents, 51.5 percent were employed. The monthly income profile indicates that almost half of the respondents had a monthly income below RM2,000 (less than 700USD) and between RM2,000 to < RM5,000 (between 700 USD to 1,500 USD) range, while 13% reported incomes RM14,000 and above (4,500USD and above). The result also showed that 51 (25.5%) respondents were Malay, 22 (11%) were Chinese, 14 (7%) were Indian, while 4 (2%) were Malaysians of other ethnicities and lastly, 109 (54.5) were non-Malaysian. Non-Malaysian may refer to tourist or travelers such as from United Kingdom, Australia, France, United States, Canada, Thailand and Indonesia.

Table 1: Respondent Profiles

Demographics		N	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	113	56.5
	Male	87	43.5
Age	Below 20	15	7.5
	20 to < 30	69	34.5
	30 to < 40	57	28.5
	40 to < 50	32	16.0
	50 to < 60	16	8.0
	60 and above	11	5.5
Education	Postgraduate Degree	66	33.0
	Bachelor degree	65	32.5
	Diploma	24	12.0
	Secondary school	38	19.0
	Below secondary	1	.5
	Others	6	3.0
Occupation	Student	60	30.0
	Employed	103	51.5
	Self employed	22	11.0
	Unemployed/retired	10	5.0
	Others	5	2.5
Income	Below RM2,000 (less than 700USD)	52	26.0
	RM 2,000 to < RM5,000 (between 700 USD to 1,500 USD)	47	23.5
	RM 5,000 to < RM8,000 (between 1,500 USD to 2,500 USD)	28	14.0
	RM8,000 to <RM11,000 (between 2,500 USD to 3,500 USD)	28	14.0
	RM11,00 to <RM14,000 (between 3,500 USD to 4,500 USD)	19	9.5
	RM14,000 and above (4,500USD and above)	26	13.0
Ethnicity	Malay	51	25.5
	Chinese	22	11.0
	Indian	14	7.0
	Others (Malaysia)	4	2.0
	Non-Malaysian	109	54.5

Reliability and Validity Tests

As illustrated in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for airline hospitality and attitude were 0.912 and 0.923 respectively. Both values were higher than the cut-off point of 0.7 as recommended by Nunnally (1978) and Hair et al. (2010). This implies that all the variables demonstrated high reliabilities and therefore, no items were deleted.

Table 2: Reliabilities of the Constructs

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Airline Hospitality	10	0.912
Attitude	5	0.923

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for all the variables used in this study. All the variables were measured on a six-point Likert scale. The mean scores for airline hospitality and attitude were 4.86 and 4.93 respectively.

Table 3: Mean, SD and Correlation of the Constructs

Variables	Mean	SD	1
Airline Hospitality	4.86	0.68	1.000
Attitude	4.93	0.58	0.730

In regard to the relationship between airline hospitality and passenger's attitude towards the airline, this study proposed that airline hospitality had a significant positive effect on passenger's attitude towards the airline. With a beta coefficient (β) of 0.730, the finding of this study showed that the effect of airline hospitality on passenger's attitude was statistically supported at a significant level of 0.001. This finding indicated that the higher hospitality hosting quality of the cabin crews, the greater will be the attitude of the passengers towards the airline.

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine passengers' perceptions of hospitality in the context of full-service airline. A specific focus of this study was to preliminarily investigate the effect of perceived in-flight hospitality on passengers' outcomes; attitudes towards the airline. The analysis shows that airline hospitality is found to have a direct effect on passenger's attitude towards the airline. The finding indicates that if the cabin crew hosting behaviour is perceived as being hospitable or of sufficient quality, then favourable attitude towards the airline will result.

Specifically, the result shows that full-service airline passengers form positive attitude towards a particular airline company when they have favourably evaluated their travelling experience with the airlines in terms of cabin crew performance, which is cabin crews' hospitable characteristic and behaviour during in-flight service delivery. This means that passengers who perceive that they have received appropriate hosting behaviour, such as being recognized, being treated individually with more attention and care or being respected by airline employees will perceive their travelling experience with the airline as being fun and pleasant. This finding is consistent with the view found beyond the airline industry context that appropriate hosting quality influences customer attitude (e.g., Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012; Teng, 2011; Teng & Chang, 2013).

The interaction effect between these two variables shed new light and offers a new perspective for airline service management on how to improve their memorable in-flight experience, which in turn help them to gain competitive advantage. Considering that hospitable in-flight customer service can improve passenger's attitude towards airline substantially, crafting the best strategies to improve cabin crew performance through providing relevant training to their service personnel, such as skills training, soft skills training and professional training will be able create a strong brand attitude towards the airline.

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