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Fostering quality customer service during Covid-19: The role of managers' oral language, employee work engagement, and employee resilience

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ABSTRACT

By integrating speech act and conservation of resources (COR) theories, the link between motivating language (ML) and commitment to quality customer service (CQCS) was tested. Furthermore, work engagement was introduced as a mediator and employee resilience as a moderator. Partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was applied to analyze the data collected from 424 employees in the hotel industry in Thailand. ML has direct and indirect effects on CQCS via employee work engagement. Employee resilience moderates the relationship between ML, work engagement, and CQCS. Overall, the findings indicate the use of ML, employee resilience, and engaged employees to generate CQCS in the hotel industry in Thailand. The study's novelty is that it provides greater insight into how ML, employee resilience, and engaged employees affect quality customer service in the hotel industry in Thailand. The findings contribute to COR and speech act theories by examining the direct outcomes of ML, i.e., CQCS, and how ML is more effective when employee resilience is a boundary condition. Practical and theoretical implications are described.

1. Introduction

Covid-19, a major global crisis, has exposed the vulnerabilities of the world tourism and hospitality industry. The world travel and tourism sector suffered a loss of almost USD4.5 trillion in 2020, a 49.1% drop in GDP compared to 2019 (WTTC, 2021). The tourism industry in Thailand was also one of the hardest-hit industries due to restrictions on mobility and border closure. In Thailand, travel and tourism contributed USD106.5 billion or 21% to local GDP in 2019 and generated 21.4% of the total employment (WTTC, 2021). However, due to Covid-19, in 2020, the GDP and employment dropped by 60.8% and 15.1%, respectively (WTTC, 2021).

Many organizations, including the hotel industry, experience communication challenges due to the unprecedented pandemic of Covid-19, calling for the role of motivational communication of leaders during these times of crisis. For instance, Bogusky-Halper (2020), Orangefiery (2020b), and Tao et al. (2022) suggested that a leader should focus on transparent, caring, empathic, factual, meaningful, and motivational communication. Undoubtedly, employees in the hotel industry also face unprecedented challenges, uncertainties, psychological distress, and emotional exhaustion during such a crisis (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2022). Indeed, communication is one of the most needed leadership competencies during the pandemic to deal with employee stress and anxiety and build trust (Dirani et al., 2020; Men et al., 2021; Orangefiery, 2020a; Tao et al., 2022). Research showed that managerial communication reduces uncertainties and mitigates emotional exhaustion and job insecurity in Thailand (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Charoensukmongkol & Suthatorn, 2021).

Besides, communication is the lifeblood of any organization; since managers/leaders spend between 70% and 90% of their time communicating with their subordinates every day, effective communication is crucial to motivate employees (Bredeson, 1987; Mintzberg, 1985; Mohr & Wolfram, 2008; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021). According to Lolli (2013), "Hospitality managers spend as much as 80% of their day

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interpersonally communicating with others" (p. 295). Unsatisfactory communication with employees costs a business an average of USD62.4 million each year, according to a survey by Buhler and Worden (2013). Therefore, it is fundamental to understand supervisors/managers' oral communication in boosting employees' psychological state, attitude, or customer-oriented behavior. Several studies during the turbulent time of Covid-19 showed that motivational supervisory communication and highly resilient and engaged employees are crucial in producing customer-oriented behavior (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Men et al., 2021; Milliman et al., 2018; Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Zhu et al., 2019).

A thriving hospitality industry relies on highly engaged and customer- or service-oriented employees (Wang & Tseng, 2019; Yang et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2019). Customer-contact frontline staff, in particular, play a critical role in providing excellent customer services (Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Teo et al., 2020; Wang & Tseng, 2019; Yang et al., 2020). Engaged employees are passionate, energetic, enthusiastic, and highly motivated about their work and rarely detach from their work roles (Karatepe et al., 2021; Rabiul, Yean, et al., 2022). Highly engaged employees also help organizations achieve competitive advantages by providing better customer service and financial performance (Gallup, 2020; Harter et al., 2016; Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Wang & Tseng, 2019; Yang et al., 2020).

Recent studies have shown that supervisors' motivational communication leads to positive employee and organizational outcomes, including employee trust, engagement, vitality, and performance (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017; Men et al., 2021; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021; Rabiul & Yean, 2021). Although previous studies have significantly contributed to understanding supervisors' motivational communication outcomes, there are notable gaps to fill. Firstly, although previous studies (e.g., Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017; Mayfield et al., 2020; Men et al., 2021; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021; Rabiul & Yean, 2021) have shown the direct outcomes of motivating language (ML), it is unknown *when* ML enhances customer-oriented behavior or commitment to quality customer service (CQCS). Secondly, studies (Kunie et al. l., 2017; Mayfield et al., 2020a; Sun et al., 2016) have demonstrated that ML produces different employee outcomes through generating organizational identification, job control, and intrinsic motivation. However, whether ML generates customer-oriented behavior or CQCS through work engagement is yet to be examined.

Thirdly, past studies are yet to identify *how* and *when* ML leads to customer-oriented behavior or CQCS in the hotel industry in Thailand. We assume that supervisors' ML alone will not make employees highly engaged and demonstrate customer-oriented behavior. Instead, we speculate that personal resilience will be a boundary condition. During the pandemic, service industries face more turbulent, volatile, unpredictable, and adverse business environments (Chen & Fellenz, 2020; Ojo et al., 2021). In such an environment, firms need a resilient workforce to cope with such adversity (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022).

According to the conservation of resources (COR) theory, when employees lack resources (e.g., low resilience), they are likely to conserve their remaining resources and detach from work (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Hobfoll, 2001). In contrary, when employees are highly resilient, they will likely be committed and engaged in their work role (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Haldorai et al., 2020; Park et al., 2019). Personal resilience has recently received much attention, and its importance has become increasingly evident throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Senbeto & Hon, 2021). Resilient employees are better equipped to deal with severe adversity and show a high level of engagement at work, career adaptability, and greater performance (Ojo et al., 2021; Safavi & Bouzari, 2019; Senbeto & Hon, 2021). Despite the significance of highly resilient and engaged employees, particularly in people-focused and service-oriented industries like hotels, little is known about how managers/supervisors' ML, employee resilience, and work engagement influence greater commitment to quality customer service (CQCS). Therefore, to fill the gaps mentioned above, this study tested work engagement as a potential mediator between ML and CQCS. Besides, the moderating role of employee resilience on the link between leaders' ML and employee work engagement in the hotel industry in Thailand was tested.

The findings of this study will contribute to the literature on hospitality, leadership communication, engagement, resilience, and customer service. First, this study extends speech act theory by empirically examining the relationship between ML and CQCS using data collected from hospitality employees. Second, this study extends the COR theory by examining the mediating role of work engagement and moderating role of employee resilience in the link between managers' use of ML and CQCS. Third, this study empirically tests the applicability of ML in enhancing hotel employees' CQCS and work engagement in the hotel industry in Thailand.

2. Literature review

2.1. Motivating language (ML) and work engagement

Kahn (1990) defined *engagement* as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in the task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performance" (p. 700). According to Schaufeli et al. (2006), work engagement is "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (p. 701). Vigor refers to a high level of energy and mental resilience (behavioral-energetic/affective), willingness to invest effort at work, and continuous work involvement, even when facing obstacles (Dai et al., 2019; Rabiul, Yean, et al., 2022). Dedication is emotional involvement in work with a sense of inspiration, pride and challenge, enthusiasm, and significance (Karatepe et al., 2021; Park et al., 2019; Saks & Gruman, 2018). Absorption (the cognitive component) refers to an individual's full concentration and deep engrossment in one's work mentally that time passes quickly, and hard to disengage from work (Bakker, 2017; Haldorai et al., 2020; Milliman et al., 2018).

Motivating language (ML) refers to the proper rhetorical crafting and framing while using the language (Conger, 1991). ML includes directive or perlocutionary, empathetic or illocutionary, and meaning-making or locutionary language (Hanke, 2021; Holmes & Parker, 2018; Mayfield et al., 1995). Perlocutionary language is characterized by how managers provide information, clarify and satisfy needs, and restore imbalance accordingly with values that reduce uncertainty and maximize utility (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Mayfield et al., 1995; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021). Employee confidence, a desire for demanding work, and a sense of belonging are enhanced by perlocutionary language, which, in turn, contribute to higher employee job engagement (e.g., Kahn, 1990; Kunie et al., 2017; Rabiul & Yean, 2021; Sullivan, 1988). If employees are given challenging tasks that have a meaning or worth for life, they are expected to participate in their jobs (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017). Employees are more engaged at work when managers clarify work roles and reduce ambiguity (Yan et al., 2021) and in the context of Thailand (Kunte & RungRuang, 2018; Kunte & Rungruang, 2019).

Illocutionary language refers to the ability to express genuine concern for emotional well-being and support through oral communication skills (Holmes et al., 2021; Sullivan, 1988). It is a manifestation of humanity that fosters interpersonal trusting relationships (Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). A more positive relationship with managers creates a psychologically safe environment, leading to increased engagement at work (Fletcher, 2016; Harter et al., 2016; Rabiul, Mohamed, et al., 2022). Genuine concern and care create a sense of psychological safety and fulfilment (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). Employees who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to participate at work with greater engagement (Kunte & RungRuang, 2018; Park

et al., 2019).

By communicating an organization's cultural environment, such as norms, structure, and values, leaders' locutionary language develops meaningful work awareness (Conger, 1991; Mayfield et al., 1995; Zhang et al., 2021). Because organizations have different values and cultures, locutionary language helps bring out employee expectations to life and organizational ability (Holmes et al., 2021; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). ML or good rhetorical constructing and framing by leaders establishes meaning about the work in assessing whether a task is sufficient, resulting in increased involvement and transparent information on job needs (Conger, 1991; Hanke, 2021; Rabiul & Yean, 2021; Sun et al., 2016). Employees' perceptions of psychological meaningfulness generate higher engagement (Fletcher, 2016; Kahn, 1990; Rabiul, Mohamed, et al., 2022). According to recent studies, locutionary language has a positive effect on work engagement (Kunie et al., 2017; Rabiul & Yean, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore.

H1. Leaders' ML is positively related to employees' work engagement.

2.2. Motivating language (ML) and commitment to quality customer service (CQCS)

Commitment to quality customer service (CQCS), service-oriented behavior, or customer-oriented behavior are identical (Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022). According to Peccei and Rosenthal (1997), quality customer service refers to "the relative strength of an individual's concern to satisfy customer requirements and to provide high-quality customer service in an individual and direct manner" (p. 69). It is a set of communication skills that allows how an employee interacts with customers and delivers the best service to the customers aiming to satisfy their wants. Customer service is not a product; rather, it is an interactive process by which a customer successfully receives the services from the employee. This study, aligned with Peccei and Rosenthal's (1997) and Clark et al.'s (2009), focused on the employees' behavioral dedication or commitment to providing quality service for the benefit of the organizations' guests. Commitment to quality customer service involves employees' positive psychological states and active use of energy and effort.

Perlocutionary language clarifies goals, rewards, and tasks, removes any confusion due to a lack of clarity, reduces uncertainty, and provides constructive feedback and rewards (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Sarros et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2021). Illocutionary language is used to express leaders' compassion and other humanistic emotions to subordinates through shared feelings, constructive thoughts, compliments, and helping personal problems (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021). It is instead 'human existence' than organizational assets, such as giving information (direction-giving or perlocutionary language) and suggestions (meaning-making or locutionary language) (Holmes et al., 2021; Mayfield et al., 2020). Locutionary language develops a better understanding of employees' needs to meet, develop, and fulfil their expectations (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Sarros et al., 2014). Thus, leaders' meaning-making or locutionary language gives reality to workers' expectations and makes their purposes more specific as every organization has different cultural norms (Madlock & Clubbs, 2019; Mayfield et al., 2020).

According to the speech act theory, managers speak various motivational languages, such as perlocutionary, illocutionary, and locutionary, generating subordinates' positive behaviors (Austin, 1962; Men et al., 2021; Sullivan, 1988). For instance, "differences in key outcomes shown by employees are the results of variance in how well managers engage in three fundamental speech acts when communicating with subordinates" (Mayfield et al., 1995, p. 331).

While perlocutionary language reduces uncertainty and confusion and creates psychological safety, illocutionary language builds personal relationships. On the other hand, locutionary language balances the subordinates' realities and expectations with organizational goals (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Madlock & Clubbs, 2019). Psychological safety, personal relationships, and meaningfulness may translate into CQCS. Hence.

H2. Leaders' ML is positively related to CQCS.

2.3. Conservation of resources (COR) theory

The basic concept of COR theory is that individuals conserve, protect, obtain, or foster their valuable personal resources (e.g., physical and emotional energy, and personal characteristics) depending on the other factors such as social and organizational resources (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Hobfoll, 2001; Ojo et al., 2021). For instance, when individuals suffer a loss of resources or experience a stress due to lack of resources, they might withdraw their effort and disengage from work roles (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Halbesleben, 2011). In contrary, when individuals experience a surplus of resources and or self believe that they can adapt the stressful situation, they might exert their effort and engaged highly at work roles (Chen & Fellenz, 2020; Halbesleben et al., 2009; Hobfoll, 2001). Furthermore, aligning with the COR theory (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Chen & Fellenz, 2020; Ojo et al., 2021), a lack of social and organizational resources (e.g., poor ML) and personal resources (i.e., lower resiliency) leads employees to attempt to conserve their remaining resources and detach from work, whereas full resources (e.g., higher ML and resilience) leads to the exertion of positive efforts and engagement at work.

2.4. Work engagement and CQCS

Work engagement is a motivational construct that includes psychological states, behavior, or attitude (Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Saks & Gruman, 2018). Engaged employees are vigorous with a high level of energy and mental resilience, dedicated with a sense of inspiration, enthusiasm, and pride, and absorbed with total and deep concentration toward the work (Teo et al., 2020; Rabiul et al., 2022). Engaged employees willingly invest effort at work and are continuously involved even when facing obstacles (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Karadas & Karatepe, 2019; Ojo et al., 2021). Several studies have shown that engaged employees are affectively committed to the work (Teo et al., 2020), demonstrate extra-role customer service (Karadas & Karatepe, 2019) and service performance (Zheng et al., 2019). Employees' high emotional dedication, vigorous energy and mental resilience, and deep and complete absorption in the work roles will likely translate into quality customer service behavior (i.e., Karadas & Karatepe, 2019; Milliman et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2019). This is consistent with the COR theory (Chen & Fellenz, 2020; Ojo et al., 2021) that employees may experience motivational resources to handle and serve customers when they are engaged at work. Precisely, according to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), once individuals experience sufficient resources, they strive to deliver CQCS. Thus, we speculate:

H3. *Employees' work engagement has positive effects on CQCS*.

2.5. The relationship between ML and CQCS via work engagement

By incorporating different dimensions of ML as an effective communication skill, managers bring out the best outcomes from their subordinates (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017; Holmes & Parker, 2018; Sun et al., 2016). According to the COR theory, managers' ML works as a resource for employees that reduces various job demands and stress, enhancing their work engagement (Chen & Fellenz, 2020; Halbesleben et al., 2009; Kunie et al., 2017; Ojo et al., 2021; Rabiul & Yean, 2021). Precisely, with higher perceived ML, employees exert their resources and become motivated to work harder and better. Therefore, we argue that supervisors' use of language (ML) to subordinate employees is a crucial resource that reduces job demands and increases engagement by clarifying work roles, making work meaningful, and building

relationships with subordinates (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021). Engaged employees "are enthusiastic about their work, immersed in their work activities, and persistent when confronted with challenges and hindrances" (Bakker, 2017, p. 1). Previous studies have shown that when employees are highly engaged at work, they produce quality customer services (Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Wang & Tseng, 2019), increase commitment to work (Teo et al., 2020), and offer better customer service and performance (Karadas & Karatepe, 2019; Milliman et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2019). Consistent with COR theory, leaders' ML is a motivational resource for employees to strive to protect and gather existing resources (work engagement) and foster CQCS. In this respect, employee work engagement mediates the link between managers' ML and CQCS. Thus, we assume:

H4. Employees' work engagement mediates the ML and CQCS relationship

2.6. Moderating role of employee resilience between ML and work engagement

Personal resilience refers to the capacity to build a psychological shield to protect a person from adverse or traumatic events (Dai et al., 2019; Kuntz et al., 2017). Personal resilience helps individuals bounce back from difficult situations and adapt to the context during adversity or risk (Kuntz et al., 2016; Wagnild & Young, 1993). The conceptual definition of the term resilience is "… a personality characteristic that moderates the negative effects of stress and promotes adaption …" (Wagnild & Young, 1993, p. 165). Employee resilience, on the other hand, describes how an individual show "an adaptive behavioral capacity to gather, integrate and utilize organizational resources" (Naswall et al., 2019, p. 354). Employee resilience is a concept that implies an existential process of how an employee survives under a turmoil work environment and provides maximum output to the employer (Kuntz et al., 2016; Naswall et al., 2019). Individually resilient employees may not work in a group because they lack teamwork or cannot be fully committed to group well-being. Therefore, this study focuses on employee resilience instead of personal resilience, defined by Kuntz et al. (2016) as "the capacity of employees to utilize resources to continually adapt and flourish at work, even when faced with challenging circumstances" (p. 460).

The COR theory suggests that employees with available resources will maintain existing valued resources, exert their resources, and motivate themselves in work roles (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Haldorai et al., 2020; Park et al., 2019). On the contrary, lower resilience can generate strain, stress, uncertainty, anxiety, and burnout (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021). As a result, employees will be demotivated and act to conserve their existing resources (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Saks & Gruman, 2018; Wang & Tseng, 2019). The COR theory postulates that employees employ themselves in work roles when they believe that they have adequate organizational (i.e., higher ML) and personal resources (i.e., higher resilience) (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Halbesleben et al., 2009). Inversely, employees may conserve or withdraw from their work roles when they experience inadequate organizational (i.e., lower ML) and personal resources (i.e., lower resilience) (Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Wang & Tseng, 2019). In this regard, the effects of managers' ML on work engagement could be increased, decreased, reversed, or remain unchanged, depending on the higher ML and higher resilience or lower ML and lower resilience. Thus, we expect that employee resilience moderates the effect of ML on work engagement such that the relationship becomes stronger when employees have higher resilience and weaker when they have lower resilience. Hence, the hypothesis proposed:

H5. Employee resilience moderates the link between leaders' ML and employee work engagement.

Finally, the research framework is shown in Fig. 1.

3. Method

3.1. Population

According to Krungsri research, Thailand had 784,000 hotel rooms in 2019 (Lunkam, 2021). Phuket city has the second-highest number of rooms (84,700 to 120,000) and more than 1,800 hotels, followed by the capital city of Bangkok (Manakitsomboon, 2021; Wongsuwan et al., 2020). During the pandemic, these two cities were open to tourists. Therefore, the hotels in Bangkok and Phuket were chosen for this study. Nevertheless, we only collected data from the Safety and Health Administration Plus (SHA+) hotels (N = 63), as these hotels were mandated to revive tourism during the pandemic where tourists were allowed to stay (Manakitsomboon, 2021; Wongsuwan et al., 2020). We collected data from SHA + hotel employees (i.e., room attendants, concierges, waiters and waitresses, health & spa servers, front office agents, supervisors, and lower-level managers) who reported their views on their immediate supervisors'/managers' ML. They also provided opinions on their level of work engagement, CQCS, and resilience.

3.2. Data collection

We collected data through a structured questionnaire by employing convenient sampling (e.g., Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Karatepe et al., 2021; Kunte & RungRuang, 2018; Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Safavi & Bouzari, 2019) for two reasons. First, many hotel managers were uncomfortable allowing us to do an official survey because of the government restriction during the pandemic. Instead, they suggested that we look for employees, managers, and alumni who would assist us willingly. Hence, questionnaires were given to them (i.e., employee, alumni, managers) who were willingly assisted to disseminate survey unofficially. Second, to reach a wide variety of hotels in two big cities, we had to rely on alumni and our network to distribute and collect the survey.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, hard and soft copy (e.g., online) questionnaires (e.g., Naswall et al., 2019) were provided to hotel staff either through hotel managers or our research representatives. Since our target was to cover as many hotels (N = 63) as possible for higher variant samples, we solicited help from alumni (university students working in hotels) and 12 representatives who had a bachelor's degree in hospitality management and had work experience in the hotel industry. We distributed between 10 and 15 questionnaires to every hotel. An instruction was written on the questionnaire asking the participants not to return the completed questionnaire to the managers but instead to directly hand them over to the researcher/representatives after between two and three weeks of their available time.

3.3. Demographic profile

Table 1 displays the demographic statistics. Regarding marital status, 69.3% of the participants were single, and 19.8% were married. Regarding the age group, 33.7% were in the 27–31 age group, 34% in the 22–26 range, and 19% in the 32–36 range. Approximately 55% were women, 40% were men, and about 5% identified as being transgender. Transgender people are common in Thailand (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2021). Regarding education, 44% had a bachelor's degree, 13% had a master's degree, 18% went to high school or below, and 25% had a college or diploma. The departmental distribution was as follows: 40.6% were from the front office, 33.3% from food and beverage, 10% from spa and beauty, and 16% from housekeeping and sales & marketing. The majority (54%) had 3–5 years of industry experience, 24.5% only 0–2 years, and 21.5% had more than six years of experience.

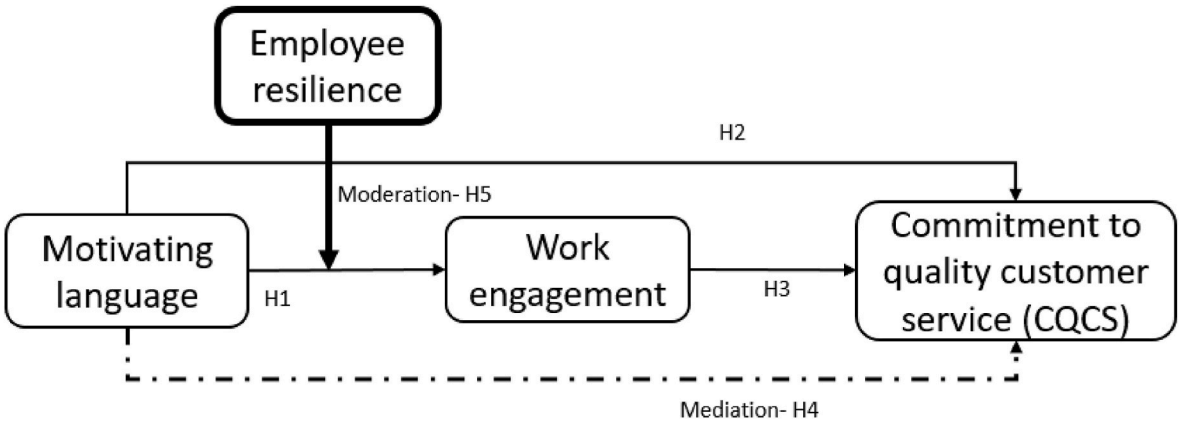

Fig. 1. Conceptual framwork.

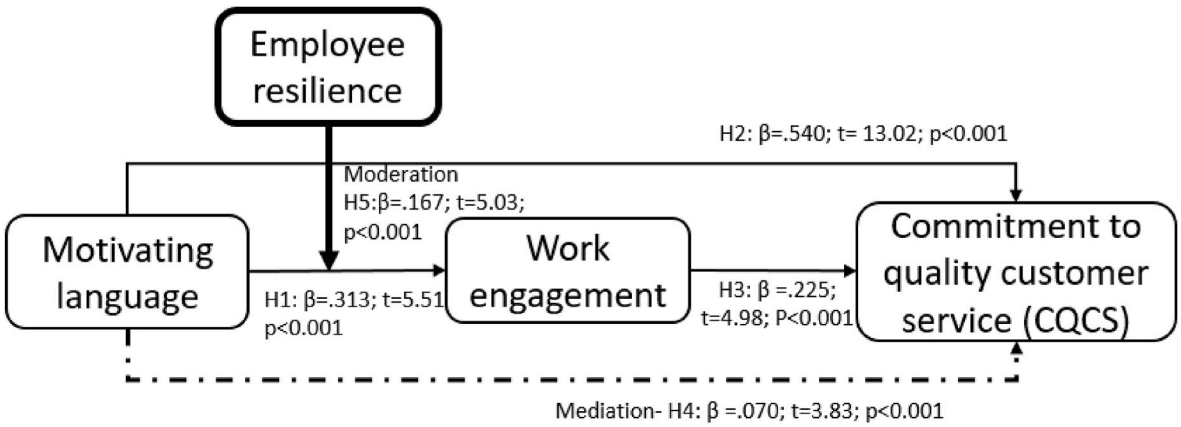

Fig. 2. Hypothesized results.

Table 1
Demographic profile of the participants (n = 424).

Category		No. of Participants
Gender	Male	171
	Female	233
	Others/transgender	20
Marital status	Single	294
	Married	84
	Separated/divorced	46
Age Group in years	Below 21	29
	22–26	146
	27–31	143
	32–36	81
	37 and above	25
Education	High school and below	76
	College/Diploma/others	106
	Bachelors	187
	Masters	55
Departments	Front office	172
	Food and beverage	141
	Sales & marketing	42
	Housekeeping	26
	Spa/beauty/health	43
Position	Junior/assistant managers	31
	Team leader/supervisor	98
	Non-supervisory/general	295
Experience	Up to 2 years	104
	3–5 years	229
	6 and above	91

3.4. Measures

All items were measured on a seven-point scale that ranged from 1 (never) to 7 (always). A seven-item scale developed by Clark et al. (2009) was used to assess CQCS. Rabiul, Patwary, et al. (2021) showed good reliability and validity of the scale in the hospitality setting. A sample item was "I enjoy discussing quality-related issues with people in my organization."

An eight-item scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006) was used to measure employee work engagement. A sample includes "I am proud of the work that I do." The scale has been widely validated in the hospitality context (Teo et al., 2020). Employee resilience was measured by an eight-item scale developed by Naswall et al. (2019). A sample item includes "I approach managers when I need their support."

Supervisory communication or motivational language (ML) was measured using 19 items developed by Mayfield et al. (1995). Multiple dimensions were considered to measure this concept, including direction-giving or perlocutionary (seven items), meaning-making or locutionary (six items), and empathetic or illocutionary (six items) language. This scale has been validated in the hospitality context and found to have good reliability and validity (Men et al., 2021; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2016).

3.5. Measurement translation in Thai and pre-test

We translated the questionnaire from English to Thai that all employees could understand the items. Next, we back-translated it into English, following the recommendation of Brislin (1970). After translating the items using Google translation, two bilingual MBA students

fluent in Thai and English checked the translation and corrected it. One senior lecturer in management and one Thai language teacher checked and modified the translation for further refinement. Both versions of the questionnaire were given to eight hotel employees to check for ambiguity.

3.6. Data screening (outliers and normality)

We checked for multivariate outliers in the data set using Mahalanobis distance. Any response with a significance level of more than 0.001 was removed. We also followed Kim's (2013) recommendation and found that the data was not highly abnormal (see skewness and kurtosis values in Table 2). Common method variance (CMV) was checked by running an exploratory factor analysis, as recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2012) and Podsakoff and Organ (1986). The result indicated the highest variance of 31.68% by a single factor. Thus, our single-source data set was less likely to have CMV problems (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Furthermore, the bilingual and short versions of the measures were used to minimize fatigue and other biases (Podsakoff et al., 2012). To prevent a single-source bias, the participants' identity was not asked, and they were free to withdraw at any time during the survey.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Validity and reliability

PLS-SEM is suitable for testing models with multiple mediating and moderating latent variables (Sarstedt et al., 2020), such as the model in our study. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted by running an algorithm in Smart-PLS. Table 3 shows that the indicator loadings were >0.629, AVE>0.515, and composite reliability (CR) > 0.886, confirming convergent validity. Since any items loaded below 0.50 were removed from the construct, the average variance extracted (AVE) was equal to or more than 0.50 (Benitez et al., 2020; Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2015). Several items were deleted due to higher VIF values (e.g., Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2015). They were two items from CQCS, one item from employee resilience, one item from work engagement, three items from direction-giving or perlocutionary, and two items from meaning-making or locutionary language.

Vigor, dedication, and absorption are the three dimensions of work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006). We ran an algorithm with three dimensions together with other constructs. We found one item had a higher VIF, so it was removed, leaving eight items for the subsequent analysis. Additionally, vigor, dedication, and absorption had a correlation above 0.90, indicating unidimensionality (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Henseler et al., 2015). The result is similar to previous findings (see the review by Vallieres et al., 2017), including those reported by the original author (i.e., Schaufeli et al., 2006).

We computed the path coefficient, t-values, and CR to consider ML a second-order reflective construct. Three dimensions were positively correlated with ML (CR = 0.931), such as direction-giving or perlocutionary (β = 0.74, t = 23.76), empathetic or illocutionary (β = 0.88, t = 76.27), and meaning-making or locutionary (β = 0.86, t = 51.64), indicating no issues of higher-order constructs (Benitez et al., 2020; Mayfield et al., 1995).

For divergent validity and multicollinearity, loading and cross-loading of the individual items, variance inflation factor (VIF) values of individual items and VIF for constructs, and the heterotrait monotrait (HTMT) ratio were examined. Table 4 indicates that the HTMT ratio of the relationship among the construct was below 0.90 (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Henseler et al., 2015), confirming that all latent variables were distinctively different.

Table 3
Validity and reliability.

	Constructs	CR	AVE	Loading (lower-higher)	Total items
1	CQCS	0.887	0.529	0.668–0.774	7
2	Employee resilience	0.903	0.540	0.633–0.802	8
3	Work engagement	0.923	0.601	0.740–0.819	8
4	Direction-giving/ perlocutionary language	0.916	0.612	0.580–0.842	7
5	Empathetic/illocutionary language	0.909	0.626	0.720–0.829	6
6	Meaning-making/ locutionary language	0.916	0.645	0.732–0.839	6

Note: Average Variance Extracted = AVE; CQCS=Commitment to quality customer service. CR=Composite reliability.

4.2. Fit indices

The result showed that predictive relevance (Q^2) was greater than zero (see Table 5), implying that the model had predictive power (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2019). The coefficients of determination (R^2) for work engagement were 0.180 and 0.430 for CQCS. The exogenous variables (ML, personal resilience, and work engagement) explained 43% of the variance in endogenous variables. According to Hair et al. (2019) and Benitez et al. (2020), whether the model is weak, moderate, or substantial depends on the values of R^2 as follows: 0.67 = substantial, 0.33 = moderate, and 0.19 = weak. Our model had predictive power, which was between moderate and weak.

Table 4
Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CQCS	–					
2. Employee resilience	0.532	–				
3.Work engagement	0.461	0.415	–			
4. Direction-giving/ perlocutionary language	0.487	0.444	0.224	–		
5. Empathetic/illocutionary language	0.600	0.605	0.434	0.515	–	
6. Meaning-making/ locutionary language	0.603	0.548	0.353	0.445	0.790	–

Note: CQCS= Commitment to quality customer service.

Table 2
Bivariate Pearson correlation among variables, mean, skewness, kurtosis, and standard deviation.

Constructs	Mean	Std. dev.	Skew-ness	Kur-tosis	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CQCS	4.50	.914	−.264	.425	–					
2. ER	4.55	1.010	−.320	.044	.469**	–				
3. WENG	4.05	.984	.191	−.277	.406**	.374**	–			
4. PL	4.42	1.147	−.715	−.007	.425**	.395**	.199**	–		
5. IL	4.47	1.135	−.617	.015	.521**	.543**	.387**	.447**	–	.
6. LL	4.47	1.111	−.679	−.105	.529**	.492**	.318**	.392**	.695**	–

Note: ** 2-tailed significant correlation at 0.01 level. PL=Perlocutionary or direction-giving language; IL=Illocutionary or empathetic language; LL = Locutionary or meaning-making language; ER = employee resilience; WENG = work engagement; CQCS=Commitment to quality customer service.

Table 5
Model quality.

Variables	Adjusted R^2	Q^2
CQCS	0.430 (moderate)	0.425
Work engagement	0.180 (weak)	0.210

Note: CQCS= Commitment to quality customer service.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

We explored if adding more theoretically meaningful control variables would alter our results, as Becker (2005) suggested. We did further analyses by including age, experience, gender, and educational level. The control variables changed only slightly our result. Therefore, we omitted demographic variables during the path analysis following earlier studies (Haldorai et al., 2020; Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Zheng et al., 2019). We decided to eliminate the control factors since the results were consistent and robust, and we could rule out the idea that the control variables were a plausible explanation for the findings, as suggested by Becker (2005). Thus, we only reported the findings that included the relevant variables of interest.

We applied bootstrapping with over 5,000 samples and included all variables simultaneously (counting latent variable score) to test mediation and moderation (Nitzl et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2019). All our direct and indirect hypotheses were supported (see Table 6 and Fig. 2 for t-values and p-values). For example, the findings showed that employee resilience moderated the link between ML and work engagement and between work engagement and CQCS. Moderation and mediation were performed based on Zhao et al. (2010) and Nitzl et al. (2016). The model was run at a single time and included all variables. The p-values, t-values, and confidence intervals were used to determine the significant or insignificant effects.

5. Discussion

As proposed, the result demonstrated that leaders' ML significantly affected employee work engagement and CQCS. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported. Our findings are consistent with the earlier studies that leaders' ML is the catalyst for enhanced employee work engagement (Kunie et al., 2017; Rabiul & Yean, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021), employee performance, and commitment (Hanke, 2021; Holmes & Parker, 2018). This could be because communication skills are crucial to engaging and managing employees at work (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017; Rabiul & Yean, 2021; Rabiul, Shamsudin, et al., 2022). In the pandemic, delivering the message to employees in a meaningful way to articulate the organizational purpose builds a sense of commitment, excitement, and emotional attachment, leading to greater work engagement and CQCS. For instance, direction-giving or perlocutionary language clarifies work roles and expectations and reduces psychological distress (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021), generating psychological safety at work (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). A leader's use of direction-giving or perlocutionary language reduces uncertainty, increases employee trust and enhances meaningful work, leading to greater work engagement and CQCS (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2017; Ling & Guo, 2020; Men et al., 2021; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021; Rabiul & Yean, 2021). Meaning-making or locutionary language reinforces the organization's culture, values, and purposes and strengthen the value between employees and the organization through informal talk or gossip (Hanke, 2021; Sarros et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2016). In the pandemic, leaders' meaning-making or locutionary language may help employees understand their ability and crystalize the organization's purpose, making meaning for employees. Empathetic or illocutionary language demonstrates concern, care, and appreciation (Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021), building an employee-manager relationship and organizational trust in the pandemic (Men et al., 2021).

Emotional support includes empathy, care, and encouragement. It assists employees in dealing with health and mental challenges during the pandemic (Men et al., 2021; Restubog et al., 2020). The pandemic disrupts employees physically, financially, and emotionally (Restubog et al., 2020). Language with meaning has been shown to be effective in keeping people motivated and resilient in the face of the pandemic (Schutt, 2020). Emotional regulation is critical for reducing negative emotions and improving well-being inside and outside the workplace (Restubog et al., 2020). In the face of the current destructive and disruptive Covid-19, it is critical to recognize and appreciate the power of emotion regulation (Restubog et al., 2020).

The study findings also demonstrated that employee work engagement was significantly related to CQCS. Additionally, work engagement mediated (complimentary mediation) the link between ML and CQCS (see Zhao et al., 2010). Hence, H3 and H4 were supported. The finding supports earlier studies that showed dedicated, absorbed, and vigorous employees are more likely to generate greater customer service behaviors (Karadas & Karatepe, 2019; Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022; Zheng et al., 2019). The finding is consistent with the COR theory (Chen & Fellenz, 2020; Halbesleben et al., 2009; Kunie et al., 2017; Ojo et al., 2021) that a surplus of resources at work from the organization (managers' ML) should enhance the existing resources (work engagement), leading to CQCS. Even in the Covid-19 pandemic, our finding shows the similar outcomes as work engagement as a motivational resource.

Finally, employee resilience was found to be a significant moderator that strengthened the link between ML and work engagement (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 demonstrates that employee resilience significantly differs for high and low (lines are not parallel or deviate from zero). Specifically, the relationship between ML and work engagement has increased when ML and resilience are high. Contrarily, the relationship between ML and work engagement has decreased when ML and resilience are low.

Previous studies showed highly resilient employees have a greater adaptive capacity to cope with stressful situations (Kuntz et al., 2016; Wagnild & Young, 1993). Several studies found resilience to be a significant moderator; highly resilient employees could reduce their anxiety and depression and increase their self-esteem (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Bani-Melhem et al., 2021). Employees with higher adapting capability to work in a group and in an unprecedented time of crisis strengthen the influence of leaders' ML on employee work engagement. This is harmonized with the COR theory that employees exert their resources (resilience) when they experience available resources (ML) from the organization, making them motivated in their work roles (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Haldorai et al., 2020; Park et al., 2019). In other words, individuals might exert their effort by engaging at work when they have the self-belief to adapt to situations and additional support by leaders through ML, providing support to COR theory.

Table 6
Direct effects, mediation effects, and moderation effects.

No.	Hypothesized path	95% BCCI			
		β	t-values	LL	UL
H1	Motivating Language → Work Engagement	0.313	5.513*	0.203	0.426
H2	Motivating Language → CQCS	0.540	13.026*	0.458	0.620
H3	Work Engagement → CQCS	0.225	4.988*	0.138	0.311
H4	Motivating Language → Work Engagement → CQCS	0.070	3.832*	0.040	0.115
H5	Employee Resilience*Motivating Language → Work Engagement	0.167	5.034*	0.101	0.229

Note: n = 424. CQCS = commitment to quality customer service, BCCI = bias corrected confidence interval. * = $p < 0.001$; LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The current study adds to the literature on leaders' speech acts, employee resilience, and customer and employee management in the

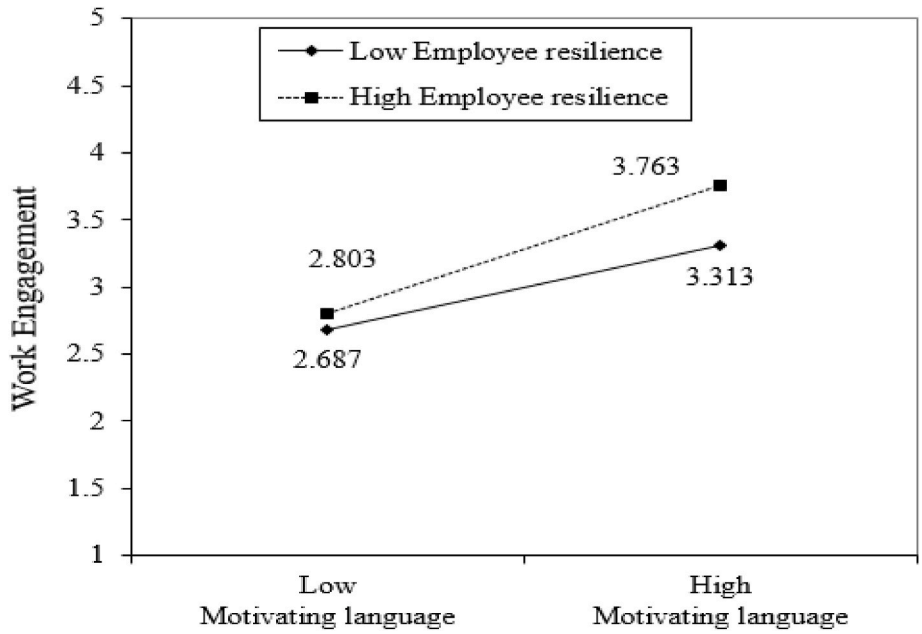

Fig. 3. Moderation effects of employee resilience.

hospitality industry. First, the most significant contribution is managers' use of oral language or ML in enhancing quality customer services. Customer service is not a direct outcome of managers' use of spoken language only; it also depends on the employees' level of engagement and resilience. Regarding quality customer-oriented behavior in the hotel industry, our findings add new outcomes to leaders' use of ML. These findings support previous research that leaders' oral language influences employees' customer-oriented behavior (e.g., Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988), validating the speech act theory in the hotel industry in Thailand (Austin, 1962; Rabiul & Yean, 2021). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to examine CQCS as the outcome of ML in the hotel industry in Thailand.

Second, the findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating how leaders' oral language enhances the delivery of quality customer service. CQCS is not only a direct result of managers' verbal language or ML but also of work engagement. Thus, this study extends the COR theory (Chen & Fellenz, 2020; Halbesleben et al., 2009; Kunie et al., 2017; Ojo et al., 2021) in that managers' oral language or ML works as a resource and motivation for employees to work (i.e., work engagement), consequently enhancing CQCS.

Third, managers' oral language or ML alone is insufficient to produce a higher level of motivation (i.e., work engagement). Employee resilience at work is a boundary condition that complements the managers' language to produce a higher level of engagement at work. Employees are more engaged when managers' language and employee resilience are synchronized. Thus, this study extends the COR theory (Halbesleben et al., 2009) by including employee resilience as a moderator between leaders' ML and employee work engagement. The findings indicated that employees demonstrated better work engagement and quality customer service behavior when they had a higher level of resilience at work. Managers' ML and employee resilience were examined to find ways to produce a higher level of engagement and CQCS. Thus, the finding enriches the work engagement literature in the hotel industry through applying ML and COR theories.

Fourth, although several studies have been conducted on different contextual settings, such as education, health sectors, and others (Kunie et al., 2017; Madlock & Clubbs, 2019; Mayfield et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021), only limited studies were carried out in hospitality (Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Rabiul, Fee Yean, et al., 2021; Rabiul & Yean, 2021), particularly on managers' ML and its effects on engagement and CQCS in Thailand. Hence, this study adds value to managers' communication by investigating hotel employees.

Fifth, instead of individual resilience, this study focused on employee resilience. According to Kuntz et al. (2016), employee resilience is "the capacity of employees to utilize resources to continually adapt and flourish at work, even when faced with challenging circumstances" (p. 460). Individually resilient employees may not work in a group because they lack teamwork or are not fully committed to group well-being. On the other hand, resilient employees fit and work well.

Finally, to the best of our knowledge, limited research has been done to see if ML is linked to work engagement and CQCS with a boundary condition of employee resilience. We demonstrated that job resource (i.e., ML) is augmented by employee resilience, leading to higher work engagement and CQCS. The study contributes to managerial communication research that employee resilience is a collection of abilities and qualities that help foster employees' CQCS and engagement.

5.2. Practical implications

This study has several practical implications for human resources managers in the hospitality industry in Thailand and beyond. Unlike other industries, the tourism and hospitality industry requires employees to be customer-centric to retain customers and for future growth (Dai et al., 2019; Milliman et al., 2018; Park et al., 2019; Rabiul, Patwary, & Panha, 2022). This study provides a useful insight for hospitality professionals that customer-centric behavior (i.e., CQCS) could be achieved by exercising managers' use of language or ML. The findings suggest the importance of fostering leadership qualities through a practicing spoken language strategy for other service organizations, such as airlines. For example, ML could effectively reduce uncertainties and emotional distress (Kunie et al., 2017). Thus, managerial communication effectively diminished Thai flight attendants' job insecurity (Charoensukmongkol & Suthatorn, 2021). All other industries across the world may implement the findings of this study to make their employees committed and engaged at work. HR managers should also concentrate on hiring managers and supervisors who practice ML for organizational success (Men et al., 2021; Rabiul & Yean, 2021). Managers' ML will likely increase employee intention to stay in the organization and performance through engagement (Hanke, 2021; Homes & Parker, 2018; Kunie et al., 2017; Rabiul & Yean, 2021).

The use of ML is also critical to addressing the challenges of the current business world, including low employee morale due to the Covid-19 pandemic, low job engagement due to fear of infection, issues related to innovation, knowledge sharing, global operations, and flexibility to incorporate rapid and diverse changes in the environment, among others. Organizations may want to train managers on how to utilize effective ML strategies to improve employee engagement and CQCS. Managers who frequently exercise ML are indispensable and invaluable resources for an organization, especially during times of global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Men et al., 2021; Tao et al., 2022). Following CoR theory, hoteliers and other organizations may consider managers' ML as an effective resource to enhance need satisfaction and coping strategies during a pandemic for better employee engagement (i.e., Tao et al., 2022).

Furthermore, managers in the hospitality industry can use ML to build relationships with subordinates and provide guidance through metaphoric language (meaning-making or locutionary) to ensure endurance under challenging times. Charoensukmongkol and Suthatorn (2021) studied hospitality employees and found that effective two-way communication could ease insecurity during the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand. ML could be an effective strategy for hospitality managers to reduce uncertainties, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress among employees to be engaged and deliver quality services.

However, top management must recognize that the organizational climate may work against supervisors' ability to effectively exercise their authority to help employees (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). Therefore, organizations that want to survive crises must build the necessary infrastructure to allow for healthy communication and interactive decision-making in a flexible, agile, and open environment. The pandemic is affecting people's personal and professional lives. Organizations need to keep employees informed by using ML that includes clear direction, empathy, and meaning for their lives for greater engagement at work and CQCS. Hence, it is critical that the messages communicated are aligned, realistic, positive, balanced, and distributed through appropriate channels (Dirani et al., 2020). By delivering a concise message that captures the complexity of the crisis and lays out the path forward, leaders can motivate subordinates for better customer service by building trust (e.g., Dirani et al., 2020; Ling & Guo, 2020; Men et al., 2021).

This study also aids managers and supervisors by underlining the need for employee resilience. Our findings show that high employee resilience significantly strengthens the link between ML and work engagement, leading to greater CQCS. A resilient and engaged workforce is critical to enhancing competitive advantages through improved employee service behavior. Studies showed that hospitality employees, especially customer-contact frontline employees, require high resilience for career adaptability, competence, and customer service (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Dai et al., 2019; Safavi & Bouzari, 2019). Therefore, the hiring procedure for customer-contact frontline personnel should be given extra attention. The forbearance of an individual employee may motivate the group members, resulting in higher work engagement and CQCS. Employee resilience can be considered a set of abilities and qualities that can be enhanced and developed through effective training and development (Safavi & Bouzari, 2019; Senbeto & Hon, 2021).

5.3. Limitations and future research

There are several limitations of this study. First, the empirical findings were based on a cross-sectional method. However, a longitudinal study could be used to examine the gradual mechanism of ML and CQCS. Time-lagged data could be another opportunity for future studies. Future research may first collect opinions from the managers. A few weeks later, data on work engagement and employee resilience could be collected. Finally, CQCS could be collected in time three. Because stronger inferences can be formed about the temporal correlations between the variables, the findings of this study need to be reproduced with a longitudinal approach.

Second, it is uncertain whether the findings are generalizable to other industries and locations in Thailand and other countries as the data were collected from a particular industry in a single country. The data on CQCS, work engagement, ML, and employee resilience were gathered solely from the hotel industry. In the future, data should be obtained from other industries, such as healthcare, business organizations, etc. By comparing multiple industries and countries, future research could enlarge the scope and findings using a multi-industry and multi-country comparison. Thailand, a collectivist culture, stresses interpersonal relationships. Therefore, managers respect each other in a work environment and use oral language that does not hurt subordinates.

Third, employee self-rated data could be another drawback of the study (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Although the authors took all necessary steps to reduce CMV, future research may consider collecting data from multiple sources, including managers, subordinates, and customers. It can also include individual and organizational performance that map the links between ML, work engagement, and employee resilience of diverse organizational stakeholders.

Finally, a different sampling technique, such as stratified sampling, could be used to replace a convenience sampling technique to improve the findings. Future research may also investigate the psychological process associated with leaders' language in other cultural contexts to improve the generalizability of these findings. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees are not uncommon in Thailand. Future studies may conduct research and compare demographic profiles by collecting more data on male, female, and transgender employees.

6. Conclusion

Our research used the speech act theory and COR to explain how ML contributes to CQCS through a mediational pathway involving work engagement and the moderating effect of employee resilience. Our results are consistent with earlier studies in that ML significantly contributes to work engagement. Additionally, similar to earlier studies, employee resilience is a relevant moderator that strengthens the link between ML and work engagement. However, our contributions are unique as we investigated the impact of ML on CQCS directly and indirectly through the mediating mechanism of work engagement and moderating role of employee resilience. Besides, previous studies only focused on individual resilience, which might not work well in groups. Instead, our study focused on employee resilience. In practice, this research shows hospitality professionals how to enhance human resources for customer-centric behavior during a pandemic. The study's findings can help researchers and practitioners better understand the dynamics between quality customer service and its antecedents in the hotel industry. HR practitioners may utilize the results of this study to improve the most valuable resource (i.e., people) for greater work engagement and quality customer service in the hospitality and other service industries. Hotel managers should establish and maintain a work environment where co-workers and supervisors communicate in a motivating way. Managers and HR professionals should invest in practicing communication that is motivating to subordinates. They also may consider a strategy to develop employee resilience in a team.

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