



Business Sustainability through the Lens of Dual Strategy: The Review Literature of Airline Industry in Thailand Context

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Abstract

The airline industry has been plagued by several huge factors such as cutthroat rivalry exacerbated by both traditional and low-cost carriers, the rising of fuel prices, and the fatal Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the purpose of this paper aims to examine the business sustainability initiatives through dual strategy in the case of the airline industry in Thailand context. A dual strategy has been widely used in several businesses, particularly the airline industry. Singapore Airlines has consistently outperformed its competitors throughout its history, relying on this dual strategy. Strategies of differentiation and cost leadership have usually necessitated different and incompatible investments and organizational models. A dual strategy consisting of differentiation implies high-quality offerings, and significant investments in innovation, staff development and branding, leading to higher costs than average. Simultaneously, cost leadership is an organization's policy. The airline industry in Thailand faced an ambiguous challenge to survive in the industry. It needs to increase performance and sustain its competitive advantage, through effectively implementing a dual strategy: differentiation through service excellence and innovation, together with simultaneous cost leadership in its organization. This paper examines strategic alignment using a vertical alignment framework and concludes by highlighting the significant challenges ahead. This paper employs a qualitative systematic literature review of methods and resources. The final 42 articles have been analyzed with the inclusion and exclusion criteria for synthesis. Discussions and conclusions are presented on the effective findings to implement a dual strategy for long-term business sustainability. Academic and managerial implication supports the scholar in business and management research and offers the industry insightful data that are useful to implement its strategy to battle with the business challenges and obstacles

Keywords: Dual Strategy, Business Sustainability, Airline Industry



Introduction

Prior to the recent unprecedented disruption in global air travel, caused by COVID-19, every day, the airline industry carried over 9 million passengers travelled on over 100,000 flights over a network of about 51,000 routes while transporting US\$17.5 billion worth of commodities to worldwide industry and homes in the form of air freight or air cargo (O'Connell, 2018). In 2019, 4.5 billion passengers were carried by the world's airlines, amounting to revenue of \$838 billion (IATA, 2020). In the same year, the industry employed directly about 3 million people (IATA, 2020) while supporting nearly 88 million jobs worldwide in aviation and related tourism. While the airline industry has experienced rapid growth in the past and has become an increasingly significant enabler of global transport, it has also demonstrated decelerating fuel efficiency improvements, leading it to become one of the fastest-growing industries in the global economy in terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Kim, Yun & Lee, 2014). At the same time, the industry has one of the largest groups of stakeholders in any sector, and the airlines should be responsive to all of them through reporting.

The disruption to the industry has occurred for a long time, over the past two years, and it caused a very big impact on all airline's business operations. In June 2020, because of the pandemic, IATA (the International Air Transport Association) gave an estimate that the airline industry would lose approximately USD84.3 billion, but the actual amount of the industry's losses was even worse and reached up to USD118.5 billion, equivalent to approximately THB4,029 billion (Sari, Ramadhani, and Prameswari, 2021). Airline industries in Thailand have faced fatal circumstances in keeping business performance. In the recent year 2023, the world has opened up the border for people to travel across countries to boost the nation's economy through aviation and tourism. Hence, airline industries, referring to the entire industry while airline business refers to specific airline organizations, need to be regenerated business for long-term sustainability. Development and implementation of the strategic plan for the market are vital for the post-pandemic when air travel resumes and the heavy rivalry in the industry. The airline industry has effectively used a dual strategy to overcome immense challenges and gain competitive advantages.

The objective of the study

To examine business sustainability through dual strategy for the airlines industry in Thailand context



Literature Review

Dual Strategy, Ambidexterity and Paradox

A metaphor of dual strategy is a paradox, yet it is achievable, it is argued by Michael Porter, a dual strategy would be impossible to achieve and be sustained over time because they necessitate contradictory investments and organizational processes (Abdi & Càmaraturull, 2022). Enhancement of service excellence and innovation requires significant resource investments from organization capital and a value system that privileges the pursuit of excellence; whereas cost leadership, on the other hand, requires controlling, saving, and cutting possible costs while maintaining adequate quality, and a value system that privileges thrift. Thus, it would risk being "stuck in the middle", achieving neither cost leadership nor differentiation: "Achieving competitive advantage requires a firm to make a choice rather than being 'all things to all people' is a recipe for strategic mediocrity and below average performance (Agrawal, 2021). Porter conceded that firms could temporarily achieve such strategies if competitors are stuck in the middle, having achieved neither cost leadership nor differentiation if cost is strongly affected by market share and inter-company relationships. However, an integrated strategy would be an advantage in copying by competitors, leading to the need for firms to ultimately make a clear choice about which generic strategy to pursue and focus their resources and implementation efforts on, in a highly aligned and internally consistent manner.

Ambidexterity presents the coin as two faces and, in some situations, playing ambidexterity is necessary like a dual strategy to achieve the goal. The product differentiation shows the service excellent innovation through the brand image perceived by customers that praise the company for its high value. On the other hand, employees must put all their efforts into achieving service excellent with the low remuneration received. Further, the generic strategies proposed are not necessarily mutually incompatible but can be seen as different dimensions of strategic positioning.

The successful implementation of dual strategies, therefore, requires ambidextrous capabilities. Several scholars have advocated that companies should aim to balance features that are considered contradictory, incompatible or in tension. For example, It is recommended by Agrawal (2021) that organizations should balance competing for the present, with developing competencies for the future, reflecting Akbar and Kisilowski (2020) suggested that to balance the exploitation of current organizational arrangements with exploration, the search for new ways of competing and new offerings. Aji, Ramadhan and Hidayatullah (2021) recommended that firms should have two planning horizons, short and long-term, that would be in an iterative relationship with each other. Albers, Daft, Stabenow and Rundshagen (2020) recommended that companies could balance the present (exploitation) with the future (exploration) by instituting separate subsidiaries with



separate strategies and organizational characteristics; integrated through a common executive team at the corporate level, an approach that has become labelled in the literature as “structural ambidexterity”. Carmine et al. (2021) similarly suggested that adopting a second business model is an appropriate response to a disruptive competitor and that the two business models could be kept sufficiently separate to avoid organizational conflicts between them, but potentially integrated selectively to pursue synergies when these are possible. Gössling (2020) posited from structural ambidexterity (having separate units or business models focusing on either exploitation or exploration) towards contextual ambidexterity, which they viewed as the ability of individuals to exhibit both alignments to current goals as well as adaptability for the future by constantly making judgments about how best to allocate their time, within a supportive organizational context. Even though the above research is enlightening, there is still a significant gap in the current state of knowledge. It is still not known enough about how organizations can realize dual generic strategies within the same organizational set-up. Akbar and Kisilowski (2020) framed the discussion temporally, in terms of competing for the present and preparing for the future, or balancing exploration and exploitation., Cheah (2021) moved the debate towards the level of individual behaviors and development of a supportive organizational context, to balance alignment and adaptability.

Ambidexterity through the lens of Paradox

A paradox involves “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”. Heiets, Oleshko, and Leshchinsky (2021) suggested that there are four generic ways to deal with paradoxes, where A and B are seen as poles of the paradox. Firstly, accepting that A and B are opposing and trying to gain insights from this opposition; second, assuming that A and B operate at different levels of analysis and engage in spatial separation; thirdly, assuming that A and B are each prevalent at different periods and engaging in temporal separation, and finally looking for a perspective that integrates and A and B and attempting a synthesis. Adopting a paradox lens allows us to conceptualize ambidexterity not simply as involving tensions and tradeoffs between poles that are meant to be separate, but importantly in terms of developing organizational responses and capabilities that can embrace or synthesize these tensions, the fourth possibility of synthesis. Heracleous and Wirtz (2014) identified nested paradoxes relating to innovation, involving the pursuit of both profits as well as breakthroughs concerning strategic intent, both tight and loose coupling concerning customer orientation and requirements and both passion and discipline concerning personal drivers. It is constituted these paradoxes can be simultaneously fulfilled through integration and differentiation aspects of organizational arrangements, going beyond previous recommendations of



structural and contextual ambidexterity. Repeatedly, Heracleous and Wirtz (2014) examined the dual strategy at Singapore Airlines and offered initial ideas on the paradoxes that SIA balances but did not go in-depth into the processes and practices involved. Heracleous (2013) offered an analysis of how Apple Inc manages to deliver outstanding products and services in terms of innovation and design, at an industry-leading level of organizational efficiency. This is accomplished through organizational and strategic choices in areas such as product-market focus, flat organization design with simplicity in processes and selective outsourcing, related diversification with real synergies, and building an ecosystem rather than simply value chains.

In-depth studies of how organizations can effectively implement dual strategies can enable us to gain further insights into how ambidextrous capabilities can be nurtured through the management of organizational paradoxes. This underlies our objectives in researching Singapore Airlines from this perspective.

Business Sustainability

Commonly defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987), sustainability aims to secure intergenerational equity. Rotondo, Corsi and Giovanelli (2019) expressed in this way, the principles of sustainability are indisputable. Most people want to live as well as their parents and they want their children to enjoy similar opportunities. The same logic applies in business—most managers want their business to be at least as profitable as in the past and, ideally, for profits to grow. Based on this logic, business sustainability can be defined as the ability of firms to respond to their short-term financial needs without compromising their (or others) ability to meet their future needs. Thus, time is central to the notion of sustainability

While sustainability management is becoming more widespread among major companies, the impact of their activities is not reflected in studies monitoring the state of the planet. What results from this is a “big disconnect.” With this article, we address two main questions: “How can a business make an effective contribution to addressing the sustainability challenges we are facing?” and “When is business truly sustainable?” In a time when more and more corporations claim to manage sustainably, it needs to distinguish between those companies that contribute effectively to sustainability and those that do not Shen, Yan & Tzeng (2017). Providing an answer is clarifying the meaning of business sustainability. Also, to review established approaches and develop a typology of business sustainability with a focus on effective contributions to sustainable development.



Sustainability is fast becoming fashionable in strategic management, and yet its meaning is often elusive. Some people restrict sustainability to environmental issues, and others use it synonymously with corporate social responsibility. Sustainability obliges firms to make intertemporal trade-offs to safeguard intergenerational equity.

Airlines industry in Thailand context

The airline industry especially low-cost airlines in Thailand is facing many challenges. The industry before COVID-19 was already competitive. Post COVID-19 era requires aviation firms to adjust themselves. Creating additional value and dispersing information is seen as an important strategy for airlines. Firms try to invest in innovation and uplift the service excellent through content creation, especially on social media which is considered a low spending budget in terms of advertisement for a positive impact on their brand. Tiwari, Singh and Mathur (2018) found that firm-created content as well as user-generated content have a positive impact on various brand aspects. Traditional airlines like Thai Airways International and Bangkok Airways have been perceived by the public as service excellent carriers reflecting how much airlines invest in product differentiation while keeping cost leadership within a company. A dual strategy should be considered to implement in the Thailand context for both traditional and low-cost airlines to run the business for sustainability despite the heavy rivalry in the industry

The largest airlines based in Thailand

The largest airline in the country with scheduled passenger traffic and in terms of fleet size is Thai Airways. In 2021, it carried 3.50 million passengers. It currently has a fleet of 46 aircraft. The main airlines for civil passenger traffic in Thailand are:

Table 1: The largest airlines in Thailand

IATA Code	Name	Callsign	Fleet size	Destination
TG	Thai Airways International	Thai	46	40
FD	Thai Air Asia	Thai Asia	45	67
PG	Bangkok Airways	Bangkok Air	35	30
DD	Nok Air	Nok Air	22	20
WE	Thai Smile Airways	Thai Smile	20	35
VZ	Thai VietJet Air	Thai Viet Jet	16	13
SL	Thai Lion Air	Matari	13	50
XJ	Thai Air Asia X	Express Wing	8	11

Source: Law, Prompitak & Wongwattanakit, 2022



Methods and resources

This paper posits a dual strategy as a tool that enhances business sustainability in the case of the airline industry. The qualitative research design with a systematic literature review method was applied to probe into previous and existing scholarly research articles on a dual strategy implemented in the airline industry. The benefit of a systematic literature review is that it provides transparent protocols by which researchers search for and assess a field of study relevant to a specific research topic; as such, it has been widely used in the social sciences as well as the business and management field (Vithayaporn, Yong, and Chai, 2021). The systematic literature review and searching method in this paper is shown in Figure 1 to set the search boundaries as protocols of the search strategy.

First, the search covered the 10 years from 2013 to 2023, as the focus is on a dual strategy in the airline industry and business sustainability. It was conducted in several databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and Thai Citation Index (TCI) to avoid missing out on relevant articles. Second, the authors sourced peer-reviewed articles published in the specified period from relevant top-ranking journals in the fields of business and management and air transport management. Sample journals were the Journal of air transport management (Scopus Q1 and Impact Factor 7.41), Journal of Business and Management, and management review. Third, the document analysis technique was used to review the selected articles.

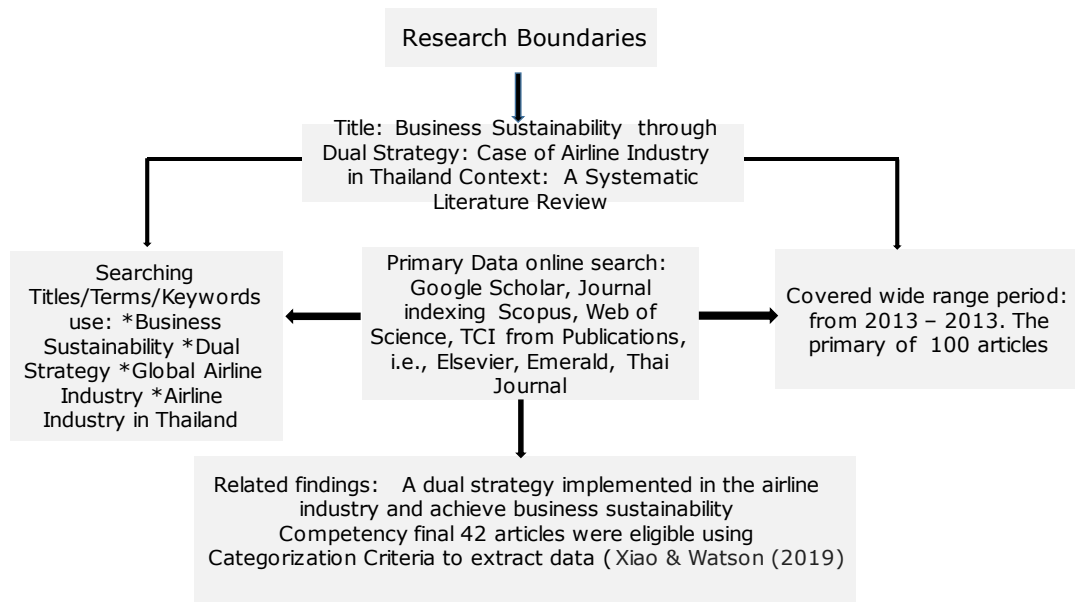


Figure 1: Research Boundaries

Source: Developed by author



In line with the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the data collection in the search process consolidated more than 100 preliminary articles related to the term dual-strategy, business sustainability, and the global airline industry. At this stage, it found English and non-English literature, which was separated under inclusion and exclusion criteria as the requirement. After retrieving the search results, they were filtered in table form. This allowed the author to identify and remove 18 duplicate articles, resulting in 82 articles. Next, after reviewing the articles' titles and abstracts, it excluded 45 articles and included five more articles related to the topic for the sampling determination see Figure 2.

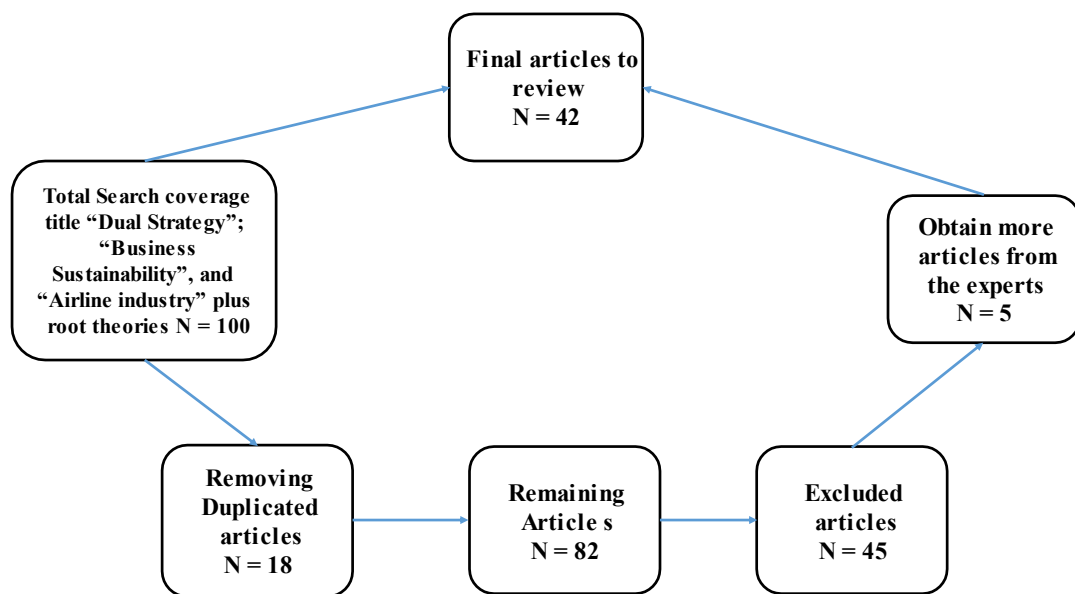


Figure 2: Sampling determinations

Source: (Developed by author)

The search criteria were exported to the EndNote software, which aided the inclusion and exclusion process. Further details on the inclusion and exclusion criteria are described in the following sections.

Inclusion criteria

The importance of adopting inclusion criteria facilitates a standardization process to search relevant literature. This paper applied three criteria of inclusion in this systematic review, which were 1) Peer-reviewed academic papers in the past 10 years; 2) The most relevant studies on the airline industry implemented a dual strategy for business sustainability; and 3) Specification of the airline industry in Thailand context and best practice in implementing a dual strategy. Finally, the author captured all related studies that met these criteria for further analysis.



Exclusion criteria

An extensive evaluation of the articles was conducted to identify and eliminate irrelevant articles. First, the studies excluded a dual strategy in different fields, for instance, studies on a dual strategy for the factory context. Second, if an article examines the influence of business sustainability without an explicit reference to a dual strategy, it was excluded. Lastly, it prioritized peer-reviewed academic journals; therefore, it excluded articles from non-academic journals, conference papers, working papers, and corporate reports

Findings

The analysis and synthesis of 42 articles have extracted the finding, a dual strategy of product differentiation and cost leadership usually has incompatible investment and organizational models. For instance, low-cost carriers like Thai Air Asia, Thai Lion Air, and Thai VietJet Air are cost-effective business models as their strong points however, they can initiate production differentiation to increase business opportunities in the long term. Whereas traditional airline, Thai Airways International, has been named the world's best airline for several consecutive years and in recent years cost leadership has been the priority in line with the ambidexterity point of view that maintaining excellent service brand perception but laying off employees for cut cost at the same time. A low-cost carrier is cost leadership its characteristics, and product differentiation by uplifting its services excellent through the professionalism of the employees

Product differentiation, for example, implies high-quality offerings, and significant investments in innovation, staff development and branding, leading to higher costs than average. Airlines can achieve a differentiation strategy, but intriguingly, without a cost penalty. Vice versa, as mentioned above, airlines can implement significantly higher efficiency within a peer group, the key feature of a successful cost leadership strategy. This paper offers the necessity of implementing a dual strategy, particularly in Thailand context See Table 1 outlines the usefulness of the elements discussed above the dual strategy integrated elements of product differentiation and cost leadership. Moreover, Innovations not only increase differentiation but also efficiency, less investment in innovations can lead to higher efficiency



Table 2: The elements of a dual strategy

Product Differentiation	Cost Leadership
Positioning of service excellence & superior quality, brand equity, customer commitment, and service quality complies	Young fleet (fuel efficiency, lower maintenance costs, effective fuel hedging) leasing strategy rather than total purchase
Developing a significant brand ambassador representing the airline (Human Resources Development Plan)	Labor costs compared to major competitors, salary benchmarking to control the wages budgets
In-flight experience (young fleet, entertainment system, gourmet cuisine – operations strategy)	Related diversification through efficient subsidiaries that contribute to the bottom line
Cultural values and practice of constant innovation and learning	Cultural values: cost consciousness, obsession with reducing wastage

Source: Aji., Ramadhan, & Hidayatullah (2021); Heights, Oleshkon& Leshchinsky, (2021).

Discussion and conclusion

The airline industry in Thailand faced ambiguous crisis times to run the business as the national carrier, Thai Airways International, placed the petition to amend the business reorganization plan (the “Plan”) caused by the huge loss of financial. Likewise, Bangkok Airways, the second privileged airline in Thailand, cut its operation in terms of route and employees immediately when the pandemic hit the aviation industry. Followed by the rest of the airlines, for example, Thai Air Asia, Thai Lion Air, and Thai VietJet Air also seeking aid from the government to support their business. Air travel eventually resumes hence the airline needs to regenerate its business in the tough competitive environment. The study of dual strategy discussed the support of previous studies Wirtz (2020); Zhang, Sampaio, Fu and Huang (2018); Zhao (2021); Wassmer and Madhok (2017), while ambidexterity and paradox are dimensions in implementing a dual-strategy confirmed to Watanapalachaikul (2021); Cheah (2021); Vermeulen and Witjes (2016); Heracleous and Wirtz (2014)

The ability to implement a master paradox and balance contradictory competencies and positions is becoming increasingly important, because of the simultaneous service quality and cost-effective pressures in most industries and the advancement of technology that challenge or reshape existing business models. These include the organization culture, strategic HRM, strategic investments in technology that can support dual strategies, and optimal organization design that leads not only to



efficiency but also to adaptability and learning, improving skills. Business sustainability competitive advantage can be affected afterwards because such self-reinforcing complex systems are less possible for competitors to imitate. The ability to implement a dual strategy and overcome paradoxical tensions in a manner that does not compromise. Paradox and ambidexterity remain while product differentiation and cost leadership are simultaneously for long-term business sustainability

Implications and recommendation

This paper has implications for both theoretical and managerial. First, for theoretical is extensively confirmed paradox theory and a dual strategy apply in a different context of the airline business. Second, managerial is for organizations that aim to deliver service excellence, by outlining human resources management and development practices that support in achieving the company’s goal; and for senior management, it highlights the importance and contribution of HRM/D to the advancement of competitiveness and the importance of strategic alignment between functional strategies and business-level strategies for the long-term ultimate goal of business sustainability. HRM/D plays an important role in building employee engagement within organizations that impact services excellent delivery to the customer (Vithayaporn & Ashton, 2019)

For future research recommendations, this paper offers the proposed conceptual framework to conduct either quantitative or qualitative to specific airline businesses rather than the entire airline industry see Figure 3 for the proposed model recommended for future research. Figure 3 shows the relationship between product differentiation and cost leadership reflecting dual-strategy in the airline industry. The most effective components of production differentiation consist of services excellent, human resources development/management, inflight experience, and cultural value while cost leadership consists of young fleets, labor cost, efficient innovation, and value creation. Individual components may also be measured by specific indicators to test cause and effect through hypothesis in a quantitative approach.

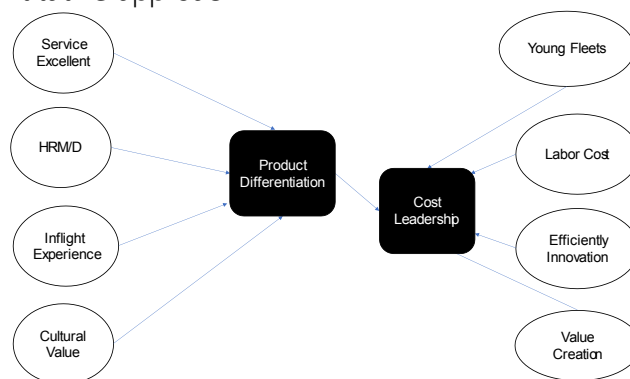


Figure 3: Proposed Model for Future Research



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