

GENERAL ARTICLE

The Australian flight attendant study (AFAS): qualitative method to understand health and socio-cultural issues in the air

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, international flight has been made more accessible through the availability of cheaper services offered by budget airlines. However, one important aspect of the provision of airline services is an intricate understanding of the role of the flight attendant and their health. While the literature has examined perspectives of those working abroad, minimal attention has been paid to the Australasian perspective. Qualitative research, primarily interviews, can yield a wealth of information that can be used to further understand factors affecting flight attendants' health during the course of their occupation.

A novel interview protocol was developed, against the backdrop of current literature that attempts to understand the perspective of flight attendants and their imperative roles in flying. The research instrument consists of two main parts: a) a demographic survey, and b) an in-depth semi-structured interview. Furthermore, suggestions for sampling of participants, stratification of interviewees and research questions are proposed. A major unique defining characteristic of this protocol is the stratification of FAs based on the degree of "regionality" of their flight paths taken during their daily work. Upon thematic analysis of interview data, regionality may then be used to stratify themes based on the flight paths of the flight attendants interviewed. This will allow novel comparisons to be made that can be used to highlight issues that may occur during flight, as mentioned by FAs; and for conclusions to be drawn in the impacts of flight time on a range of issues such as self-health, rostering, sleep and jet-lag.

The proposed demographic survey can be used to capture participant details of the study. The research questions proposed can be interrogated through involvement of a semi-structured interview set to stem from these questions. Furthermore, the novel sampling strategy will lead to unique perspectives being derived from data through comparison across groups. It will help elucidate important perspectives regarding issues such as jetlag, self-health and sleep.

The work described has put forward a novel methodology to understand the perspectives of FAs regarding their health. It is posited that these perspectives may enhance those already in the literature, and set new frontiers for understanding psychosocial aspects surrounding flying, that may have an impact on staff health.

Keywords: flight industry; flying; airline health; qualitative; mixed-methods

การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพของพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบินของสายการบินออสเตรเลีย เกี่ยวกับความเข้าใจถึงปัญหาสุขภาพ สังคม และวัฒนธรรม ในระหว่างการบิน

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บทคัดย่อ

ปัจจุบันประชาชนสามารถเข้าถึงเที่ยวบินระหว่างประเทศได้มากขึ้น ผ่านบริการของสายการบินราคาชั้นประหยัด สิ่งสำคัญอย่างหนึ่งของการให้บริการสายการบิน คือ บทบาทของพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบินและเรื่องสุขภาพของพนักงาน ซึ่งมีวรรณกรรมน้อยมากที่กล่าวถึงหรือให้ความสำคัญประเด็นนี้ในมุมมองของชาวออสเตรเลีย การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ซึ่งส่วนใหญ่เป็นการสัมภาษณ์ทำให้ได้ข้อมูลมากมายที่สามารถเข้าใจปัจจัยที่มีผลต่อสุขภาพของพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบินในระหว่างการทำงาน

รูปแบบการการสัมภาษณ์แบบใหม่นี้ได้รับการพัฒนาขึ้น ซึ่งสวนทางกับวรรณกรรมปัจจุบัน โดยพยายามทำความเข้าใจมุมมองของพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบินและบทบาทที่จำเป็นในการบิน เครื่องมือในการวิจัยประกอบด้วย 2 ส่วนหลัก คือ ก) การสำรวจด้านประชากร ข) การสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกแบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง นอกจากนี้ยังมีการเสนอคำแนะนำสำหรับการสุ่มตัวอย่าง การจัดกลุ่มผู้ถูกสัมภาษณ์ และคำถามการวิจัย คุณสมบัติหลักที่ถูกกำหนดของรูปแบบใหม่นี้คือ การแบ่งชั้นของ FAs ตามระดับ "ภูมิภาค" ของเส้นทางการบินในระหว่างการทำงานประจำวันของพนักงาน

การสำรวจประชากรที่น่าเสนอสามารถใช้ในการแสวงหารายละเอียดของผู้เข้าร่วมการศึกษา ส่วนคำถามการวิจัยนั้นสามารถใช้ในการพัฒนาข้อคำถามการสัมภาษณ์กึ่งโครงสร้าง นอกจากนี้กลยุทธ์การสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบใหม่จะนำไปสู่มุมมองที่ไม่ซ้ำกันของข้อมูลผ่านการเปรียบเทียบข้ามกลุ่ม ซึ่งจะช่วยอธิบายมุมมองที่สำคัญเกี่ยวกับปัญหาต่าง ๆ เช่น เจ็บเล็กน้อย สุขภาพตนเอง และการนอนหลับ

แนวคิดนี้ได้นำเสนอวิธีการใหม่เพื่อทำความเข้าใจมุมมองของ FAs เกี่ยวกับสุขภาพของพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบิน ซึ่งอาจช่วยเสริมมุมมองที่มีอยู่แล้วในวรรณกรรม และเป็นการกำหนดขอบเขตใหม่สำหรับทำความเข้าใจด้านจิตสังคมโดยรอบของการบินซึ่งอาจส่งผลกระทบต่อสุขภาพของพนักงาน

คำสำคัญ อุตสาหกรรมการบิน การบิน สุขภาพของสายการบิน การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ

การวิจัยแบบผสมผสาน

INTRODUCTION

Invariably, times have changed for the airline industry internationally. With the availability of discount flights, transportation of individuals across the globe is becoming more frequent and less uncommon. The development of astronomical leaps in airline technology has seen the aerospace industry projected into the future. The recent introduction of the Boeing 787 Dreamliner, which will service Australians travelling from Perth to London, is a pertinent example of the ever-so-changing innovations in aircraft design and performance.

Indelibly, the airline industry would not be able to function without the professional staff who make flying a reality. Flight attendants (FAs) are one of the most important personnel to assist in this procedure. Irrespective of individual context or situation, the job of the FA is to not discriminate, providing world-class customer service before, during and to some extent, after the flight has concluded to that individual. Flight attendants assist passengers in boarding the aircraft, are responsible for the provision of meals. They have to deal with various emergencies which may arise and keep passengers sheltered from what is occurring.¹ As such they are responsible for the smooth running of flight operations, logistically and psychologically.

The duties of flight attendants are thus diverse. Various authors have commented on how the two fundamental roles of FAs surround: (1) provision of services, and (2) safety.^{2, 3} While it has been suggested that asserts that flight attendants "...are more defined by their service role", rather than safety,⁴ it has also been stipulated that safety is "...the most important part of [a flight attendant's] job".⁵ Furthermore, it has also been discussed how flight attendants are being noticed now "...as first responders" ⁶

confirming their important part of airline safety. Further to the suggestion of FAs having "...dominant performance of reassurance and accommodation..." ¹ in the context of subduing any apparent emergencies, it seems that they act as important figures that maintain 'psychological homeostasis' during flights. In addition to the important role as a figurehead of safety, there are several other issues that flight attendants must deal with during the course of flying. Bergman and Gillberg² portray an image of staff "under pressure", with staff having to deal with several more intensities (such as passenger quantity), while still having to perform the dual roles aforementioned. Further, more people are able to fly who are not constrained financially as was the case of yesteryear⁷ and there is a more "heterogeneous" cohort of passengers, not just rich individuals as in the past.² Fox³ paints a picture of a dynamic "travel industry", which "may sometimes be a challenge to crews". Further, there are various passenger insecurities that attendants have to deal with.⁸

It is apparent from literature there are several factors that comprise the role of a flight attendant. Associated with these roles are several psychosocial considerations which need to be understood. Walter⁹ put forward that "organizational commitment" is positively correlated with "quality of work-life", in her study of American flight attendants. In a different qualitative study, Nyberg and Wiklund¹⁰ stressed the individuals' importance of food consumption for Scandinavian flight attendants. While quite different studies, these two findings illustrate the multifaceted nature of flight attendant wellbeing.

While several of the literature examples discussed has been from an American context,^{1, 7, 8} it is not improbable that similar issues are relevant in the Australian flight industry. Therefore,

it would seem pragmatic to conduct a study investigating issues such as flight attendant health and associated perceptions. This would be especially beneficial against the context of Australia's newfound direct flights between Perth and London. The aim of this paper is to propose a novel qualitative research protocol that could be used to investigate issues such as flight-attendant perceived health, sleep patterns and effects on these from interactions with other staff. For reasons of convenience, this could be termed the Australian Flight Attendant Study (AFAS). Despite its' naming, it aims to understand the perspectives of FAs travelling to other nations including Asia and America, and compare these with the Australian experience.

METHODS AND DISCUSSION

The development of a unique qualitative research protocol was performed by the author MT. The protocol consists of research questions that will guide future interview development, and a demographic questionnaire. The purpose of the demographic questionnaire is to capture basic information about flight attendant participants', such as which airline routes they frequently travel, and their years of experience in the field. These data could be used to compare themes derived from interviews; on a basis of stratification between different groups based on years of experience and the degree of regionality in their usual flight routes. How the study will be carried out theoretically, is explained in more detail herein; as interview logistics.

Interview Logistics – Sampling and Groups

Interview subjects for this study could be recruited through purposive sampling, which enables encapsulation of

groups of subjects with desired demographic characteristics. For the study, there will be multiple recruitment groups (table 1). These have been chosen in order to gather perspectives from a wide range of experiences, based upon the degree of “regionality” of travel within an airline. For the purposes of convenience, these have been divided into three groups – domestic, international [local] – to South East Asia, or international [regional] – to America and/or Europe. The reason for this is attributed to the fact that experiences of staff may differ substantially depending on the length of flights undertaken in their shifts. This should ensure that a breadth of flying experiences are captured by the study. In addition, the sampling will target three groups of FAs based on their level of experience (< 5 years, termed recent, 5 – 10 years, termed semi-recent, and 10 + years, termed extensive). This is particularly useful in light of other studies which only focus on older [11] or extensively-experienced [2] personnel.

For the purposes of brevity, this study will only examine perceptions of flight attendants initially. However, future extensions of the study (perhaps in successive phases) could involve other staff such as pilots, ground staff and engineers (table 1), who will have a different insight into the research questions posed by the study (table 2).

Subjects will be recruited by dissemination of flyers to relevant representatives at airports (e.g., Human Resource Managers). This will occur only after refinement and completion of study materials, and appropriate ethics approvals from a governing body such as a university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) within Australia. These flyers may then be passed on to flight attendants who wish to participate of their own volition in the study. They will contact the researcher, MT, and arrange to meet and

conduct the interview face-to-face. This will most likely occur at a place of convenience for both parties (a café, airport after negotiation with airline staff or other prospective location). In some instances it may be more beneficial to conduct phone interviews.

Research Questions

There are several research questions which the AFAS endeavours to address, divided into three categories. These are listed in table 2. The first is focussed around self-health and flight rosters. For the purposes of this study, “self-health” may be defined as the pragmatic methods that FAs take to look after their own physical and mental health. Both are imperative to the wellbeing of FAs during flight and thus perceptions of these arising from the research design are of significance. This term may also be considered a derivative of some key issues highlighted in the flight attendant literature. For example, mental health awareness of FAs relates to overall wellness of passengers and others.⁶ In addition, it has been suggested that emotional fortitude is required to deal with, among other issues,

“passenger expectations”.⁷ Further, Williams⁵ presents a compelling argument of several related psychosocial issues of flying from an organizational context. Therefore, “self-health” is a term which can cover a variety of ways in which FAs maintain a healthy lifestyle during their job. This protocol aims to understand how such an idea is influenced by length of flights and other staff (category 1).

The AFAS also seeks to understand staff perceptions of jetlag and sleep (category 2). In particular, how staff deal with jetlag, and the effects of flight time and others in such processes. In terms of the effect of flight time, this can be understood by asking FAs from the three defined categories [domestic, international – local, and international – regional], to participate in the study. In addition, the AFAS aims to appreciate Australia-specific issues. The airline industry has been suggested to be changing, dynamic by various authors,^{2, 7} and both pilots¹² and flight attendants³ have newfound stressors. So, it would be advantageous to understand these issues from the perspective of Australian FAs, especially in light of the ever-so developing microcosm of Australian aviation.

Recruitment Groups and Potential Targets for Sampling

FOUR Airlines and Locations:

One Australian (e.g., Qantas), at Sydney International Airport in Sydney, Australia [SYD].

One Asian (e.g., Air Asia X), at Kuala Lumpur International Airport 2 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia [KUL].

One American airline that travels between Australia and America (e.g., United Airlines), at Los Angeles International Airport [LAX], **AND/OR:**

One Middle-Eastern who travels to Europe (e.g., Qatar Airways), at Hamad International Airport in Doha, Qatar [DOH].

ONE Group:

Air hostesses and hosts [collectively “Flight Attendants”].

For the purposes of this study (table 2), “staff” refers to flight attendants, while “other staff” refers to either other flight attendants, pilots or ground staff etc., depending on the context.

Table 1: Potential Recruitment Groups for the Study. This table shows the different groups of flight attendants that may be interviewed in the AFAS. Future work could also supplement these perspectives with those of other airport personnel to obtain deeper understanding of health and socio-cultural issues associated with flying.

THREE Levels of Experience:

Recent. < 5 years.

Semi-recent. 5 – 10 years.

Extensive. 10 + years.

POTENTIAL Groups [or for a later study]:

Pilots.

Passengers.

Ground staff (tarmac, terminal).

Administration staff.

Engineers and scientists.

Quality control officers.

Table 2: Research Questions (RQs) for the AFAS. *The RQs for the study fit into three categories: perceptions of health, sleep and jetlag, and situating the Australian context internationally.*

Questions to Ask Airline Staff

Category 1. Self-health and Flight Rosters

- [1] How does the job of a flight attendant warrant considerations of their self-health?
- [2] What strategies do staff take on-board a flight to look after their own health?
- [3] What are some of the positives and negatives of flight rosters?
- [4] How does rostering impact perceptions of self-health across domestic, international – local and international – regional flights?
- [5] How does the interaction with other individuals (e.g., passengers, other staff) influence self-health?
- [6] What is the perceived effect of other individuals (e.g., passengers, other staff) on the physical and mental health of flight attendants?

Category 2. Sleep and Jetlag

- [7] What jetlag attenuation strategies do staff employ?
- [8] How do staff assist other staff in reducing jetlag?
- [9] What is the average sleep (before, during, after) that staff get on three different flights? (domestic, international – local, international – regional).
- [10] What are the perceptions of staff regarding: a) Their own sleep patterns, and b) The sleep patterns of others?

Category 3. Australian Context Internationally

[11] What are some of the perceived challenges to the Australian airline industry in the foreseeable future?

[12] Has the airline industry improved in Australia over the years?

[13] How do the perspectives of FAs working in Australia compare with those in Asia, Europe and America?

Study Instrument

The study will be comprised of two instruments, delivered both at the time of interview. Firstly, a demographic survey to note fundamental characteristics of study participants. Second, a series of semi-structured interview questions which will form the framework upon which the interview will proceed. This two-part structure is similar to other qualitative studies, such as Choyce.¹³

Demographic Survey

The first part of the two-part survey is a demographic survey (table 3), designed

to record two aspects of participants' characteristics: a) contact details, and b) demographic questionnaire. The first part a), contact details are recorded such that if any questions need to be asked of participants following the interview, they may be easily contacted. The second part b), may be used to infer meaning from interviews against the context in which it evolves (i.e., certain individuals from a company or of similar experience in flight industry making common conclusions/comments in interviews).

Table 3: The First Part of the Instrument – Demographic Questionnaire

Contact Details	
[1]	Name: _____
[2]	Email: _____
[3]	Phone: _____
Demographic Questionnaire	
[4]	Age: _____
[5]	Nationality: _____
[6]	Current Company: _____
[7]	Compan(y/ies) Previously Employed With: _____
[8]	Total Years in Industry: _____
[9]	Educational Qualifications: _____

Semi-Structured Interview

The set of questions to be asked in the interviews will be decided at a later

date. Currently, the wide range of research questions (table 1) provide the basis for a series of rich interview questions to be formulated. However, input from relevant

personnel in the flight industry will assist in increasing the utility of this protocol. In a study by researchers in Washington, USA for example, administrative individuals in the airline industry were consulted when analysing data.¹⁴ Equally experts could be consulted in an early phase of this study when designing protocols. This is often done in qualitative research designs. For example, researchers in the area of rehabilitative therapies for spinal cord injury consulted individuals with the condition in designing questionnaires.¹⁵ With regards to flight-specific studies, Cafferty¹⁶ liaised with the International Air Transport Association, IATA, for the survey part of their methodology examining carbon offsetting in the flight industry. Moreover, the BEST AGE study by McMullin et al.¹¹ was a collaboration between The Boeing Company, Embraer and GMA Research. Therefore, consulting industry, other than following in the footsteps of other researchers, could greatly enhance the applicability of this study methodology.

Data Analysis

During interviews of FAs, data will be recorded on a device such as an Olympus DS-7000 recorder that can store audio files. These audio files will then be transcribed, so all the audio data is in textual format (transcripts). Thereafter, a researcher could scan the transcript to identify common themes that appear. Transcripts should be labelled differently depending on the degree of regionality of flying, of the FA who was interviewed, and/or other characteristics such as their years of experience. Thereafter, themes could be assigned to the different groups interviewed and conclusions drawn accordingly.

CONCLUSION

To my knowledge, the proposed research methodology is a novel qualitative protocol that seeks to understand further the issues surrounding flight attendants in their industry. Building upon existing literature, it is evident that flight attendants play an imperative role into the safety of passengers during flying. Given the increased internationalism of Australia in this space, a qualitative study could help further understand important issues at play. The posed protocol also seeks to compare these perspectives with international perspectives through a variety of recruited groups. It is hoped that other researchers and industry representatives will seek interest in the future refinement and discussion of this study design. Ultimately, an increased understanding of flight attendant perspectives will help in the advancement of this industry. This will only be achieved through discussion of this protocol with international experts in Australia, Asia, America and Europe.

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