
Consumers from India and the USA have differing views of flight attendants

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Abstract: Airlines are continuously working to enhance in-flight services to create a superior customer user experience. Flight attendants play an important role in the customers' travel experiences. Flight attendants have the most interaction with the passengers, which directly impacts the passenger's flight experience. The purpose of the present study is to assess the cultural differences of trust, if any, between Indians and US with respect to the age and gender of flight attendants. Analysing this aspect of trust is performed through manipulating the age and gender of the flight attendant. A cross cultural analysis comparing data from both Indian and US participants was conducted specifically asking participants to rate their levels of trust in flight attendants described as male or female and either 25 or 55 years of age. The results and the practical application of the study are discussed that resulted in useful findings for the aviation industry.

Keywords: trust; flight attendants; age; gender; India; USA.

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1 Introduction

Commercial aviation in India began on February 18, 1911 with scheduled services beginning nearly two decades later on October 15, 1932 (Singh, 2013). With scheduled flights becoming increasingly common, the need for cabin crewmembers also grew. Airlines are constantly working to improve in-flight services in order to create a superior customer experience. Flight attendants have always played an important role in customers' travel experiences. Flight attendants have the most interaction with the passenger, which directly affects the passenger's flight experience. Therefore, the focus of the study is to understand consumer perceptions of flight attendants and specifically the aviation consumers' perception of trust in the flight attendant. Analysing this aspect of trust is performed through manipulation of the age and gender of the flight attendant. Additionally, the research will conduct a cross-cultural analysis by comparing data obtained from both Indian and US participants.

2 Cultural considerations

For the purpose of this study, only two countries of origin are being studied, namely India and the USA. This is done for multiple reasons. The first is that these are the two most readily available sources of participants on Amazon's[®] Mechanical Turk[®], which is the source of participant recruitment. For the ease of collection this convenient sample has been selected for pursuing this study. Secondly, these two countries represent large populations that represent the two different cultural backgrounds of Collectivism and Individualism. This is one of the aspects that the study seeks to investigate; the differences in perceptions based on participants' country of origin and in turn their cultural upbringing and mindset.

In 1954, women who were hired as flight attendants were required to sign a contract stating that they would be required to retire at 32 years of age (Lessor, 1984). An example of increased customer and employee services is the increased retirement age of flight attendants. The retirement age in India was raised from 32 years old to 58 years old, while the USA does not have an age restriction. Previously, priority in the service sector was given to those who had excellent customer service (Chauhan and Manhas, 2014). One potential area to examine when attempting to understand these differences would be that of culture.

Culture has been defined in several different manners with a common definition being "a set of shared values and beliefs that characterize national, ethnic, moral and other group behavior" (Faure and Sjostedt 1993; Craig and Douglas 2006; Adapa 2008). Another definition for culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions of society

according to national, organisational, regional, ethical, religious, linguistic and social characteristics (Chen and Starosta, 1998). According to Hofstede (1980, 2001), it was found that Thai, Chinese and Indian cultures displayed high levels of collectivism. According to Hofstede's cultural values index, India scored a 48 out of a 100 on the individualistic versus collectivist dimension (Robbins and Judge, 2008). With a relatively median score, this indicates that India in general is a collectivistic culture but may also exhibit individualistic features (Rice et al., 2014). The ideals of individualism and collectivism are based in part to a person's interaction with others and the world around them (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). Both collectivism and individualism have been continuously identified as orientations that apply to a person's or group's relationship to others (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis 1984, 1989; Kongsompong et al., 2009). While India is considered to be a generally collectivistic society, the USA has been found to be much more individualistic in nature. The difference between India as collectivist and the USA as individualistic has been acknowledged and suggested by previous research (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Cultural influences based on collectivistic societies are grounded in social cognition and motives in social exchange (Thomas et al., 2003).

Collectivists establish themselves through methods such as gaining an interdependent self, group membership, group goals and actions guided by conformity and security. It has been suggested that people within the collectivistic culture tend to take great interest in others and are more willing to share their possessions with others (Komarraju et al., 2008). While this is true, those within a collectivistic culture also tend to be deeply concerned about how they appear to others. This includes trying not to lose face or cause others to lose face (Hui and Triandis, 1986).

As previously mentioned, the USA is generally found to be more individualistic, with a score on the Hofstede's cultural values index of 91 out of 100. Hofstede found that people from individualistic cultures are more concerned with themselves. This is in contrast to collectivistic cultures, demonstrating that individualistic cultures lay an emphasis on an individual's autonomy and independence (Bochner, 1994; Kashima et al., 1994). There is also a noticeable difference in conflict management styles between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Research between individualistic (Anglo-American) and a collectivistic culture (Taiwanese students) indicated that collectivists tend to be more obliging and avoiding while the individualistic culture tends to be more confrontational (Trubisky et al., 1991). For the current study, a comparison between these two cultures in terms of their propensity to trust is being conducted. Those that are born into a collectivistic culture are raised to be dependent and to put everyone's interest above their own. Additionally, they are taught to never question authority and to always trust. The opposite can be seen in individualistic cultures such as the US. Individuals born into an individualistic culture are taught to be independent of one another and to not trust without questioning (Han and Shavitt, 1994).

3 Social stigma: prejudice in age and gender

Positive and negative stereotypes can be formed based on an individual's age and specifically, research suggests that older adults are perceived as warm and friendly but also as incompetent and weak (Bugental and Hehman, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2005). When context is limited to age, meta-analytical reviews have shown that older adults are devalued and perceived as less competent (Kite and Johnson, 1988; Kite et al., 2005).

These perceptions are common in the individualistic culture, but also in some collectivistic cultures (Cuddy et al., 2005).

Group prejudices, or negative attitudes, are formed from these negative stereotypes and are referred to as ageism. Ageism is defined as “an alteration of feeling belief or behavior in response to an individual’s or group’s perceived chronological age” (Levy and Banaji, 2002). Social stigma is created when prejudices exist towards an individual for being part of a group (Crocker et al., 1998). This can create an individual’s value to weaken as a result of social, interpersonal and economic hindrances (Crocker and Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1991; Jones et al., 1984).

With ageism stigma becoming more prevalent within the industry, 39% of the workforce is projected to be over the age of 55 by 2020 (Rupp et al., 2006; Williams and Nussbaum, 2001). Individuals identify the employee role as having required traits that are agentic, such as assertiveness and confidence (Eagly and Steffen, 1989). Furthermore, young individuals tend to occupy this role in viewing their peers as more likely to have agentic traits than older individuals (Gekoski and Knox, 1990; Kite et al., 1991). Coincidentally, there is no correlation between an individual’s job performance and an individual’s age (Cleveland and Landy, 1983). Furthermore, Waldman and Avolio (1986) in their meta-analysis did not identify a significant difference between age groups by comparing objective measures of work-performances. Therefore, it could be implied that age stigmas can cause false perceptions of an individual’s work performance, which could result in several harmful effects such as ageist attitudes, discrimination and negative treatment (McCann and Giles, 2002). These effects can be associated with decreased self-efficacy, performance and cardiovascular stress among employees that are older in age (Levy, 1996, 2000; Levy et al., 1999).

Additionally, gender stereotypes can be strong and prevalent in the workforce. Jackman and Senter (1981) suggest that 78% of men believed that women are not emotionally equal to men. In addition, it was found that women’s beliefs were within only 1% of males. In a cross-cultural study involving 27 different countries, there was an ever-present perception that women are more agreeable and men are more outgoing (Williams et al., 1999, 2000). According to the *women-are-wonderful effect*, people have favourable attitudes towards women, in that they are perceived as more understanding, kind and helpful (Eagly and Mladinic, 1989, 1994). Although these are positive perceptions of women, there is still occupational segregation of gender within the workforce, particularly in wealthy, industrialised countries (Blackburn et al., 2002). This gender segregation has created ‘gender lines’ to create a fair environment within the workforce. For example, the occupation of flight crew is perceived as a male occupation, while the cabin crew is perceived as a female occupation. The integration of females into the flight crew can cause negative perceptions (Mitchell et al., 2006; Vermeulen, 2009). Furthermore, while gender is considered in this study, age stereotypes tend to be more pronounced than gender stereotypes (Kite et al., 1991).

Another important aspect in understanding gender considerations is cultural differences. India, a largely patriarchal nation, tends to be very prone to gender bias. Some gender stratification analyses have cited son preference and the low position of women, as primary contributing factors to the discrimination against females (Arokiasamy, 2004). Culturally, it has been argued that gender inequality exists as a result of prejudice against female education. As a result of this, society had been against women working outside their home (Bose, 2012). Census data suggests that female work

participation has declined significantly since 1921. This work participation decreased both as a percentage of workers to total female population and as a percentage to total labour force.

4 Interpersonal trust

Trust can be defined in several different forms and is considered to be a product of both emotion and psychological construct. There are numerous studies that define trust as the predictability of another person (Deutsch, 1958; Eckel and Wilson, 2004; Ergeneli et al., 2007). If predictability is a large part of trust, it can be linked to a person's familiarity. An individual is able to predict that a person with high levels of trust will have higher faith in another person (Lee and See, 2004). Whereas other studies have defined trust in terms of vulnerability, it can still be noted that trust lies in the faith of a positive result (Meyer, 1995). Trust is then built when there have been repeated positive outcomes, which can be explained further in an individual's interpersonal trust.

Interpersonal trust, the social identity theory perspective, occurs when trust in a stranger comes from perceiving a shared group membership referred to as group-based trust (Platow et al., 2012; Foddy et al., 2009). Groups in which people categorise themselves and identify with are known as in-groups, while groups that individuals do not identify with are known as outgroups. People tend to be biased towards their personal in-group, judging it in a more positive manner (Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Brewer and Silver, 1979). Part of this bias is the belief that the in-group members are more generous, trustworthy and fair (Boldizar and Messick, 1988; McAllister, 1995). The naïve theory of groups provides further explanation, in which members of a group expect that in-group members will act favourable to them in order to further the interest of the group (Kiyonari, 2002; Yamagishi et al., 1999; Yamagishi and Kiyonari, 2000).

Multiple research studies have demonstrated that stigmas can have an effect on an individual's trust (Rice et al., 2011; Burns, 2006). In this way, social stigma can diminish an individual's value to the extent that it can outweigh the in-group bias toward trust. Burns (2006) found a systematic pattern of distrust that was attributed to false behavioural stereotypes based on race, even by participants of the same race.

5 Current study

Prior research on trust has focused on trust between humans in different relationships and the stigmas that are formed (Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Boldizar and Messick, 1988; Brewer and Silver, 1978; Burns, 2006; Deutsch, 1958; Eckel and Wilson, 2004; Ergeneli et al., 2007; Foddy et al., 2009; Kiyonari, 2002; Platow et al., 2012; McAllister, 1995; Rice et al., 2011; Yamagishi et al., 1999; Yamagishi and Kiyonari, 2000). Research on ageism and gender differences has suggested that older adults are perceived as warm and friendly but also as incompetent and weak (Bugental and Hehman, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2005). When context is limited to age, meta-analytical reviews have shown that older adults are devalued and perceived as less competent (Kite and Johnson, 1988; Kite et al., 2005). As for gender, research suggests that India for instance is prone to gender bias as gender stratification analyses have cited son preference and the low position of women (Arokiasamy, 2004). Culturally, it has been argued that gender inequality exists as a

result of prejudice against female education resulting in society being against women working outside their home (Bose, 2012). Overall, occupational segregation of gender within the workforce, particularly in wealthy, industrialised countries is still in existence (Blackburn et al., 2002).

The current study fills an existing gap in the literature by focusing on the relationship of trust between aviation consumers and flight attendants. Researchers had participants respond to hypothetical situations while manipulating the age and gender of the target flight attendant in the scenarios. Participants from India and the USA provided ratings of affect and trustworthiness. The hypotheses were as follows:

- 1 That there would be differences in affect and trust ratings based on the country of origin of the participant.
- 2 That there would be differences in affect and trust ratings based on the age of the target flight attendant in the scenarios.
- 3 That there would be differences in affect and trust ratings based on the gender of the target flight attendant in the scenarios.
- 4 That affect would mediate the relationship between the conditions and trustworthiness ratings of the flight attendants.

6 Methods

- *Participants:* 384 (135 females) participants from India and the USA participated in the study. There was equal number of participants from each country. The mean age was 31.06 ($SD = 7.19$). The mean ages did not differ as a function of country ($p > .10$).
- *Procedure, materials and stimuli:* Participants were first asked to fill out a consent form and then given instructions. Following this, participants were presented with a scenario about a hypothetical commercial airline flight. They were told that the lead flight attendant was either a 25 year old male, 25 year old female, 55 year old, or 55 year old female. Participants were then asked, 'How does this make you feel?' Participants responded along three different Likert-type scales from extremely negative, unfavourable, bad to extremely positive, favourable, good. There was a zero neutral option for each scale.

The next step involved participants being asked, "How much would you trust this flight attendant during an emergency situation?" and "How trustworthy do you think this flight attendant would be during an emergency situation?" Participants were provided answers along a Likert-type scale from extremely distrust, untrustworthy to extremely trust, trustworthy, with a zero neutral option for each scale. To avoid reverse causal effects, it is important to note that the mediating variables were presented temporally prior to the outcome variables (Kenny, 2011).

Lastly, participants were asked for demographics information, debriefed and dismissed.

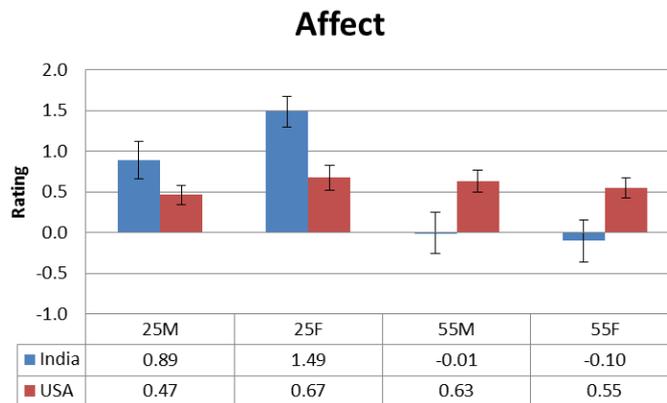
- *Design:* A three-way between-participants factorial design was employed, whereby the three independent variables were
 - 1 age of the flight attendant
 - 2 gender of the flight attendant
 - 3 country of origin of the participants.

7 Results

A Cronbach's alpha test was conducted on the affect data. Due to high internal consistency scores (r range from = .84 to .97), the Affect data was combined for further analyses. The same was performed for the trust data (r range from = .83 to .94).

A three-way ANOVA was conducted on the affect data, with age of the flight attendant, gender of the flight attendant and country of origin of the participants as the factors. There was a main effect of age, $F(1, 376) = 21.43, p < .001, partial-eta squared = .05$; however, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between age and country, $F(1, 376) = 22.90, p < .001, partial-eta squared = .06$. There were no other significant effects. As Figure 1 suggests, Indians had more positive feelings towards the younger flight attendants, while US had more positive feelings towards the older flight attendants.

Figure 1 Affect data from the experiment (see online version for colours)

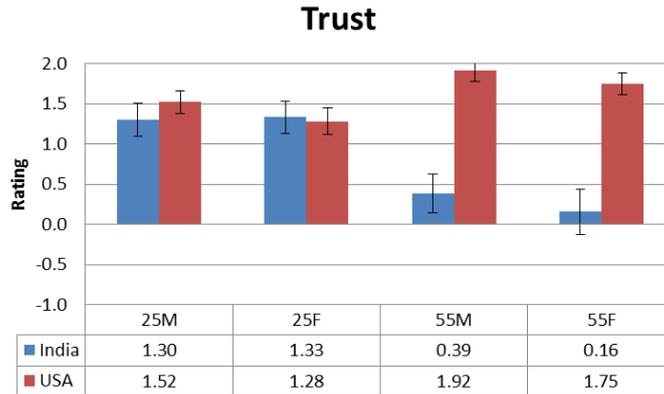


Note: SE bars are included.

A three-way ANOVA was conducted on the trust data, with age of the flight attendant, gender of the flight attendant and country of origin of the participants as the factors. There was a main effect of age, $F(1, 376) = 5.05, p = .025, partial-eta squared = .01$ and country, $F(1, 376) = 36.25, p < .001, partial-eta squared = .09$. However, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction between age and country, $F(1, 376) = 29.28, p < .001, partial-eta squared = .07$. There were no other significant effects. As Figure 2 suggests, the younger flight attendants were approximately equally trusted by participants from both countries, while the older flight attendants were trusted much more by US than Indians. Furthermore, post hoc tests

suggest that trust dropped as a function of age for Indians, but increased as a function of age for US (all $ps < .05$).

Figure 2 Trust data from the experiment (see online version for colours)



Note: SE bars are included.

7.1 Mediation analyses

The first mediation analysis was conducted using Indian participants to compare the 25M condition to the 55M condition. The paths for this mediation analyses can be found in Figure 3(a). In order to conduct the mediation analysis, the correlation between condition and trust was first found to be significant, $r = .287, p = .005$, showing that the initial variable correlated with the outcome variable. The standardised path coefficients were: condition to affect ($Beta = .266, p = .009$); affect to trust ($Beta = .730, p < .001$); condition to trust controlling for affect ($Beta = .093; p = .189$). The data suggest that affect had total mediation on the relationship between condition and trust.

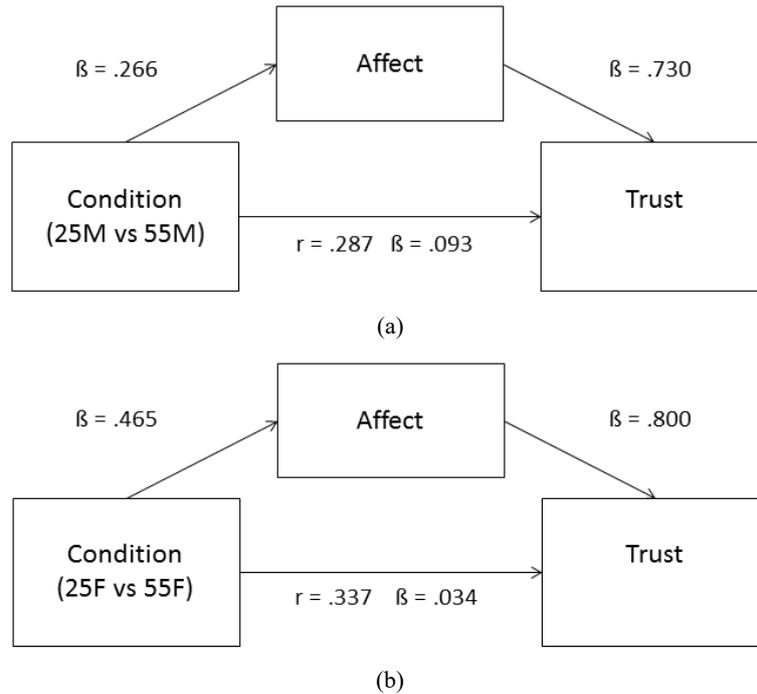
The second mediation analysis was conducted using Indian participants to compare the 25F condition to the 55F condition. The paths for this mediation analyses can be found in Figure 3(b). In order to conduct the mediation analysis, the correlation between condition and trust was first found to be significant, $r = .337, p = .001$, showing that the initial variable correlated with the outcome variable. The standardised path coefficients were: condition to affect ($Beta = .465, p < .001$); affect to trust ($Beta = .800, p < .001$); condition to trust controlling for affect ($Beta = .034; p = .636$). The data suggests that Affect had total mediation on the relationship between condition and trust.

The third mediation analysis was conducted using US participants to compare the 25M condition to the 55M condition. In order to conduct the mediation analysis, the correlation between condition and trust was first found to be significant, $r = .203, p = .047$, showing that the initial variable correlated with the outcome variable. However, because the standardised path coefficient between condition and affect ($Beta = .097, p = .349$) was not significant, no further mediation analysis was conducted. Thus, the data suggest no mediation effect for US participants in this condition.

The fourth mediation analysis was conducted using US participants to compare the 25F condition to the 55F condition. In order to conduct the mediation analysis, the correlation between condition and trust was first found to be significant, $r = .221,$

$p = .030$, showing that the initial variable correlated with the outcome variable. However, because the standardised path coefficient between condition and affect ($Beta = .067$, $p = .518$) was not significant, no further mediation analysis was conducted. Thus, the data suggest no mediation effect for US participants in this condition.

Figure 3 Paths for the mediation analyses



8 Discussions

The purpose of this study was to assess the cultural differences of trust, if any, between Indians and US with respect to the age and gender of flight attendants. The different participant groups were asked to rate their levels of trust in flight attendants described as male or female and either 25 or 55 years of age.

The first and second hypotheses stated that there would be differences in affect and trust ratings based on the country of origin of the participant and the age of the flight attendants. The results of the study supported these hypotheses, as there was a main effect for both country of origin and age of the flight attendant. These main effects were qualified by the interaction of the same. The results of the study are interesting in that US' trust in older flight attendants was higher than younger flight attendants. There are certain explanations for these findings with the most plausible of which could be that US participants are attributing age to more experience. With age and experience, it could be that these participants feel the 55 year old will be more knowledgeable in difficult situations and have experience in dealing with a variety of scenarios.

However, the study also suggested that Indians' trust in older flight attendants was lower than younger flight attendants. This indicated that the Indian participants tend to trust the 55 year old flight attendants less than their 25 year old counterparts. These findings are interesting since previous cultural research would suggest that India is a more collectivistic culture and one that reveres tradition. Therefore, such a culture would more likely respect and place more value and trust in age and experience. In eastern cultures, respect for elders is preached fairly heavily.

Another possible explanation for these cultural differences could be attributed to the participants' view of the role of the flight attendant. US participants may be viewing the role of the flight attendant as a more safety-oriented position responsible for aiding in the safe completion of a flight operation. Conversely, Indian participants' idea of a flight attendant may be more antiquated in that they are responsible for the passengers' comfort and service. For this reason, a 25 year old would be entrusted more than a 55 year old. This growing concern for the reliability in ageing flight attendants in India is often seen as an excuse to replace the older flight attendants with younger, potentially more attractive and stronger, flight attendants.

The third hypothesis stated that there would be differences in affect and trust ratings based on the gender of the target flight attendant in the scenarios. The findings of the research do not support the hypothesis. The results of the study suggest no significant effect on the gender of the flight attendants. These findings are interesting and there could be some explanations for the same. It was initially hypothesised due to the belief that participants would stereotype the role of the flight attendant to a young female. This however was not the case and so the most plausible explanation of the results could be attributed to the fact that participants believe both males and females are adept at fulfilling the flight attendant role.

The final hypothesis stated that affect would mediate the relationship between the conditions and trustworthiness ratings of the flight attendants. The results of the study support the hypothesis. Affect mediated the relationship between age and both genders, however the interesting findings of this research is that this was true for Indian participants, but not for US participants. This finding is interesting as the emotional influence on decision-making is found to be present for the results of the Indian participants but not for their US counterparts. This suggests that the US participants are not allowing their emotions to override their rational beliefs of trust with respect to age and gender of flight attendants. This could once again be potentially explained by the differing ideas of the role of the flight attendant between the two countries. A more safety-oriented flight operations role would warrant a more rational and safety-oriented decision, while a more service-oriented role may allow for a more emotional decision of trust.

9 Limitations

As per any study, there are certain limitations to the research. The main limitation is that the study utilises Amazon's[®] Mechanical Turk[®] to obtain participant data. The control of the environment is taken out of the hands of the researchers, which exposes the data to certain risks. Prior studies have iterated that MTurk data is as reliable as laboratory data (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Germine et al., 2012). Additionally, participants were

compensated for the participation in the study, which adds another layer to the mindset of the consumer while participating in the study.

The purpose of this study is to assess the consumer perceptions of flight attendants. While this study researches the cultural differences of two different countries, it is unfair to generalise these findings across the entire aviation industry. Additionally, these findings are relevant to the perceptions of today's consumers and so these findings could be different in the near future. With evolving opinions and understandings of the aviation industry, the consumers' perceptions are constantly changing.

10 Practical implications

The results of this research suggest some useful findings for the aviation industry. Since aviation is a consumer-oriented field, the views of the passengers are of great interest to the airline industry. Flight attendants are crucial crewmembers for the safe operation of a flight and therefore having insight into consumers' trust in them is of interest to the industry. There has been a growing sentiment of prejudice against older flight attendants in India and desire to have younger flight attendants as the norm. This study shows this growing sentiment amongst the Indian participants and that these decisions are heavily influenced by emotions.

In theory, another important practical benefit of the research is to identify which age and gender of flight attendants are trusted the most by passengers. This can aid airlines in making decisions in personnel placement and which type of person will be trusted the most for different sub-roles of flight attendants. Future research could replicate the present study to determine if the consumers' perceptions have changed over time. The study could also be conducted using participants from different countries all over the world to determine the global aviation perspective of trust in flight attendants. The final practical implication of the current study would be to educate different cultures on the differing views towards flight attendants.

11 Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to examine the cross-cultural differences in trust of flight attendants using participants from India and the USA. The study arose out of a growing sentiment of distrust in ageing flight attendants in India, with a push to rethink the retirement age of these flight attendants. The argument however could be deemed as an outlet to achieving an ulterior goal of younger, potentially more attractive, flight attendants. Therefore, trust in their ability according to age could be used as the more politically correct means to achieving this change. The study suggests that Indians trusted the younger flight attendant (25 years old) much more than the older counterparts (55 years old) and that affect had total mediation on the relationship between age and trust. Conversely, US participants were more trusting of the older flight attendants compared to their younger counterparts, with affect showing no mediation on this relationship. The study suggests that emotions are playing an influencing role on the Indian participants' level of trust and this could potentially be an explanation for their desire to replace older flight attendants with individuals that are younger.

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