

MEN AND WOMEN FLIGHT ATTENDANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMER  
INTERACTION QUALITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

CHELSEA RAFAN. Men and Women Flight Attendants' Perceptions of Customer Interaction Quality. (Under the direction of DR. ANNE-KATHRIN KRONBERG)

A key component of jobs in the service industry is customer service, where the success of jobs are dependent on the success of the service and interaction. More specifically, flight attendants have been a part of the service industry for a significant amount of time. Although we do see more men entering the occupation, the job of a flight attendant remains mostly dominated by women. However, this might be due to the fact that the traits associated with customer service jobs are traits that are seen as being feminine or being a woman. Prior literature on customer service focuses on perspectives of interactions from the customer, however, this study aims to focus on perspectives of interactions from the employee. Therefore, my research question is: In what ways do men and women flight attendants' perceptions of customer interactions differ? I use theoretical concepts of legitimacy theory and status characteristics theory to help explain why men and women employees have different perceptions of their interactions. To answer my key research question, I conducted qualitative interviews with flight attendants that have been in the industry for at least three years. The interviews lasted from 30-45 minutes. My findings show that there is a difference in how men and women flight attendants make sense of their interactions. Women flight attendants were more likely to recall how status characteristics affect interactions while men flight attendants were more likely to recall how aspects of their job affect interactions.

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## **Introduction**

In air travel, service is a key component to customers' experiences. However, anecdotal news stories frequently portray tense interactions between flight attendants and rowdy passengers. This study seeks to examine how men and women flight attendants perceive customer interaction quality. An integral part of jobs in the service industry in general is customer service, which involves both the employee and the customer. However, regardless of whether they are the employee or the customer, individuals have their own perceptions of what they may consider satisfactory-level customer service. Prior research suggests these differing perceptions of customer quality are in part dependent on individuals' gender (Iacobucci and Ostrom 1993; Fischer et al. 1997; Mattila et al. 2003; Snipes et al. 2006).

It is unclear how men and women flight attendants experience their interactions with customers for two reasons: current literature on service work and customer service focuses on short term interactions as well as perceptions of customer interaction quality from the customer rather than the employee. While some service industry jobs require workers to interact with customers quickly (e.g., retail and food service), other jobs in the industry require workers to interact with customers for an extensive amount of time, which may affect workers' perceptions of customer interaction quality overall. Additionally, the studies that focus on the perspective of the employee may be limited due to the fact that employees remain undervalued. Since customer interactions involve both the customer and the employee, it is imperative to acknowledge employees' perceptions as well.

This study builds on Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants and emotional labor where customers interact differently with flight attendants partly due to status characteristics such as gender. Status characteristics theory posits that whether implicitly or not, expectations

about the ways others act or behave are created solely based on the characteristics of an individual where expectations are also related to competence. Additionally, legitimacy theory examines the extent to which actions and behaviors are perceived as right or justified. Both status characteristics theory and legitimacy theory have components of power and control where individuals with higher status tend to have more power, therefore, that power becomes legitimized due to their status. Therefore, taking these theories and customer interactions into consideration, my research question is: in what ways do men and women flight attendants' perceptions about customer interactions differ?

To answer my research question, I conducted 11 interviews with flight attendants who have been in the industry for at least 3 years. 6 of the participants are men and 5 are women. Participants work for airlines ranging from American Airlines, JetBlue, and Delta and were recruited using snowball sampling and convenience sampling methods. The recruitment and interview process took place over the span of 4 months over the phone and using Zoom.

After analyzing the data, the findings of my study shows that men and women flight attendants make sense of their interactions differently. In general, men flight attendants were more likely to recall how aspects of their job affect their interactions whereas women flight attendants were more likely to recall how characteristics affect their interactions. Additionally, men were more likely to talk about their interactions and experiences more positively, focusing more on the better interactions they have had whereas women were more likely to recall the more negative interactions and express how these interactions affected them negatively.

### **A. Role of Customer Interactions in Service Work**

Customer interactions are central in working in the service industry where service workers are often required to do emotional labor. Hochschild (1983) states that emotional labor



requires workers to manage their feelings to display themselves a certain way to others to induce emotions in the customer. Adding to Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, Leidner (1999) posits that the emotional labor performed by service workers are also likely influenced by the employers. Therefore, emotional labor becomes layered where service workers have to learn to manage the emotional responses of others, such as customers, clients, and patients, while their own emotions become managed by their employers. These management of emotions are central to service work as producing certain responses from customers is integral to the job.

Leidner (1999) uses the term "nonemployees" to describe customers, clients, patients, respondents, etc. and states that in the service industry, nonemployees are not just observers; they are "coproducers of the interaction" and their cooperation is relied on in order for the work to proceed successfully (p. 83). Therefore, interactions are not just reliant upon the employee but the customers as well. Macdonald and Sirianni (1996) posit that working in the service industry also requires individuals to like their job, or pretend to like it, and to care about those they interact with. Service workers are expected to cater to nonemployees while nonemployees are expected to cooperate in order for the work process to proceed. How employees communicate and perform while working is a key process in interactions in the service industry (Nixon 2009). The customers' satisfaction with the services being provided are typically higher if employees are able to interact with them in a way that fits the customers' wants and needs. When employees are able to deliver satisfactory-level service, customers are more likely to return, increase their purchases, and generate favorable evaluations of the interaction due to higher levels of satisfaction (Liao and Chuang 2004).

Nixon (2009) posits that emotional labor is a gendered form of labor, where women-dominated fields require social skills of being charming and friendly. Hall (1993) argues that

women “do” gender through gendered scripts of good services that require them to be deferential, such as in occupations of waitresses, nurses, receptionists, etc. Although women and minorities make up the majority of jobs in the service industry, men make up a part of the service industry as well. Therefore, even in women-dominated fields, men perform emotional labor which is different from the labor that is typically asked of those in men-dominated fields, such as having to learn social skills in order to interact with others rather than having to possess assertive traits. For industries that rely on providing goods and services for others, emotional labor and how one interacts with others is important to how successful the business will be.

Prior research on men in women-dominated fields have focused on men’s experiences in the workplace and the challenges they may deal with in regard to their masculinity (Shen-Miller & Smiler, 2015). However, current gaps in the literature include perceived customer interaction quality from the perspective of the employee, which may be due to the fact that employees remain undervalued. The limited literature focusing on employees’ perspectives elicit that employees perceive customer interaction quality to be gendered as well (Groth et. al 2009). Employees feel that the interaction quality may depend on their gender as customers have expectations on how men and women service workers should perform certain tasks, therefore, these expectations become consequential.

Additionally, limited studies focus on customer interactions that occur for extended periods of time. The job of a flight attendant is different compared to other service industry jobs as workers must typically interact with a group of customers for a range of hours. For example, retail workers interact with an influx of customers, however, the interactions are typically quicker. On the other hand, flight attendants interact with groups of customers at a time for longer periods of time.

Hochschild (1983) posits that although flight attendants perform the same tasks, the job of flight attending is “not the same job for a woman as it is for a man” (p. 174). Although flight attendants still do physical and mental labor, a large part of their job is built on the emotional labor they do which ties into customer interactions, dealing with both the customers’ feelings and their own personal feelings. Hochschild (1983) posits that women flight attendants felt that they were targets for verbal abuse where men flight attendants felt that they were often called upon to deal with tough passengers “for” women flight attendants. Women flight attendants are expected to be caring and show compassionate characteristics as they provide service to customers while also maintaining professionalism as they perform their work in the public eye. Hochschild (1983) also mentions that when men flight attendants engaged in conversations with male customers, they were asked about work and career plans. However, when women flight attendants engaged in conversations with male customers, they were often asked questions on their personal lives, such as their marital status, number of kids, etc. Hochschild’s (1983) study shows that the topic of discussion changes depending on the employee’s gender. Prior research does not fully examine men and women’s perceptions of customer interactions in general so it is not clear what the difference between men and women’s perceptions will be. The theories discussed in the next section might explain why and how men and women might have differing perceptions.

Therefore, taking the aforementioned into consideration, my first guiding question is:

*GQ1: How do men and women flight attendants perceive customer interactions?*

## **Theoretical Frame**

### **A. Status Characteristics Theory**

In the sections to follow, I will discuss two closely related theories—status characteristics theory and legitimacy theory—that highlight why men and women employees have different perceptions of their interactions. Theories on status and status characteristics involve behaviors and outcomes depending on an individual's background, which includes one's age, gender, race, class, etc. Ridgeway et al. (1998) examined the relationship between status characteristics and interactions and posit that status characteristics have effects on influence, respect, and power amongst individuals. When resources are distributed in a certain way, it affects who encounters whom and the extent to which influence, respect, and power are present. Ridgeway et al. (1998) posit that such interactions can also “make both the advantaged and disadvantaged believe that the advantaged nominal category is more status worthy and competent,” therefore causing status beliefs that lead to inequality (pg. 348). Correll and Ridgeway (2003) posit that such characteristics, whether it is one's race, gender, or age, shapes individuals' access to participation and is an important aspect of social stratification.

Berger et al. (1972) mention the observable interactions and posit that “individuals either give or do not give action opportunities,” which then leads or does not lead to a performance output (p. 242). Others then evaluate the performance output in which a reward is either given or not given. Status characteristics also create expectations where we nonconsciously expect people to perform or act in certain ways due to their background where these expectations are also related to competence. Therefore, prior research suggests that individuals are either advantaged or disadvantaged depending on the characteristics they possess. Regardless of whether groups are made up of individuals with similar or different characteristics, power and influence are still

prevalent amongst those deemed as more “worthy”. Therefore, status characteristics create expectations and beliefs about who gets access to rewards and resources as well as who holds more power and influence in a group or interaction.

Foschi (1996) found that there is a stricter standard for women than there are for men when in opposite-sex dyads even while performing at the same level which creates a double standard, which can be seen in Chan and Anteby’s (2016) study on those in the Transportation Security Administration and Rivera and Tilcsik’s (2019) study on workplace evaluations. Chan and Anteby (2016) found that women TSOs were more likely to experience physical and emotional fatigue compared to men TSOs even when working in the same field. Additionally, Rivera and Tilcsik (2019) found that women instructors were more likely to receive lower scores on their evaluations than men instructors even when their skill levels were equal. These double standards are prevalent because there are generally lower expectations for women and the work that women do are seen as less valuable, therefore, women and people of color have to do more to be perceived as good as those with a higher status. Therefore, theories on status and status characteristics show how individuals are either advantaged or disadvantaged depending on their background and that one’s status also affects expectations and behaviors which plays out in social interactions.

### **Status characteristics → Expectations → Observable power and prestige order**

Status characteristics theory applies to my research question because I aim to look at the extent to which men and women flight attendants perceive the customer interactions they experience and whether there is an expectation for flight attendants to act certain ways based solely on their gender. It is evident that status characteristics affects how people interact with one

another and prior research also suggests that lower status actors, such as women and people of color, are often more interrupted and dismissed than higher status actors. Fragale et al. (2010) posit that there is an expectation for interactions to be positive with high status individuals but negative with low status individuals, therefore, I expect that women flight attendants have different customer interactions due to the fact that they have to navigate their interactions differently than higher status flight attendants. Therefore, my second guiding question is:

*GQ2: What is the role of status in gendered customer interactions?*

## **B. Legitimacy Theory**

Legitimation is the extent to which an action is perceived as right or justified, where others then view that action as being legitimized. Legitimacy theory relates to status characteristics theory in several different ways. As discussed with status characteristics, there are expectations in how individuals should behave based on the status characteristics they possess. Della Fave (1980) uses resources to explain that individuals with higher levels of self-evaluation will view themselves as deserving of high levels of resources and vice-versa. This is then legitimized because it is what we believe we deserve. When individuals create implicit expectations for what characteristics are more or less legitimized than others, it creates a standard for what characteristics will become valued in certain situations. For example, when certain individuals become influential over others, the more likely others will view the individual with influence as legitimate “by displaying honorific deference to the influential actor” (Johnson et al. 2006: 58). In other words, when characteristics are perceived as more highly valued than others and when individuals inhibit such characteristics, others are likely to perceive the individual with the perceived highly valued characteristic as legitimate. Similarly, Zelditch (2001) argues that legitimacy occurs when values, beliefs, and procedures align with and are

accepted by a group. In this case, Johnson et al. (1994) and Zelditch (2001) posit that legitimacy is a shared understanding of what makes something right or justified based on what is in agreement amongst individuals.

As mentioned previously, power is a component that is central to status characteristics, however, power also plays a key role in legitimacy as well. In some cases, individuals that are perceived to have more power or control are more likely to be legitimized, which is related to Ridgeway et al.'s (1998) argument in that status characteristics have an effect on power amongst individuals when in interactions. Power in such cases therefore becomes linked to authority, which requires both power and legitimacy. Blau (1964) illustrates this concept and posits that those with authority require power over those with less authority as well as their social approval of that power. In other words, authority requires power over less advantaged individuals as well as the approval or legitimacy of that authority from the same individuals. Therefore, legitimacy is also the process through which power is transformed into authority and the difference is in how and why we comply. Legitimacy and authority are therefore collective and exist to the extent that we agree. Hegtvedt and Johnson (2009) posit that “power is the resource that makes it possible to direct, coordinate, and instruct the activities of organization members” (p. 382). When power is used coercively, it results in resistance and opposition. When power is perceived as legitimated, it results in compliance.

Taking theories on status and legitimacy into consideration, individuals perceived to have a higher status are oftentimes seen as having more power and control in which they would receive more rewards and resources. This is due to the fact that those with higher status are often more legitimized. Additionally, status and legitimacy play a role in how power is either complied with or resisted. When individuals perceive power to be enabling and used in fairness, the more

likely they are to legitimize one's actions. Legitimacy theory applies to my research question because I aim to look at the interaction quality between customers and flight attendants and whether the perceived legitimacy of control and power are present in either the customer or the worker and whether legitimacy in power influences interactions as well. Taking the aforementioned into account, we expect men flight attendants to have more legitimacy due to the fact that men usually have more access to resources and power and are higher status actors compared to women. Therefore, my third guiding question is:

*GQ3: What role does legitimacy play in customer interactions of men and women flight attendants?*



## **Data and Measures**

### **A. Data Collection Method**

For this study, I conducted qualitative interviews with flight attendants who have been in the industry for at least 2 years. 11 flight attendants were interviewed, 6 of which were men and 5 of which were women. I conducted interviews as opposed to distributing surveys because my study aims to examine experiences with customer interactions. Interviewees are able to delve more into their experiences beyond what surveys are able to capture. In addition, talking to interviewees with open-ended questions and in semi-structured interviews allows for the conversation to bring up topics that might not have been asked in surveys such as being able to probe for more information if the respondent feels that it is central to their experiences and perspective.

Lamont and Swindler (2014) posit that interviews disclose emotions and experiences that are not seen in behavior and that “for many people, the imagined meanings of their activities, their self-concepts, their fantasies about themselves (and about others) are also significant, and we generally cannot get at those without asking, or at least without talking to people” (p. 159). This means that qualitative interviews help us understand more deeply how people make sense of their lives and actions along with how they make sense of those around them. Therefore, for purposes of this study, to better understand how flight attendants make sense of the interactions they experience with customers, qualitative interviews seemed like the best fit.

### **B. Participants and Sample**

The targeted population in my study are flight attendants in the United States and my sample is flight attendants who work for American Airlines, United Airlines, Delta, and JetBlue. This sample is important because it accounts for some of the major airlines in the United States,

therefore, individuals who work for these airlines have gone through extensive training and experience when interacting with customers compared to smaller airlines. For the qualitative interviews, I used a convenience sampling and snowball sampling method as I have friends and family members who currently work in the airline industry who referred me to those others who were interested in participating in the study. I also used purposive sampling because I recruited flight attendants who have worked in the industry for at least 3 years and who work for major airlines in the United States.

I recruited flight attendants from some of the major airlines in the United States, such as United Airlines, JetBlue, and Delta and my recruitment process took place over the span of 4 months. I created a flyer via Canva and asked friends and family in the aviation industry if they could distribute it out to their colleagues in the airlines they worked for. The flyer contained a short description of my study as well as my contact information. When potential participants reached out, I sent them the informed consent form as well as set up a time for the interview to take place. Most interviews occurred via Zoom and two interviews took place over the phone with most interviews lasting around 30-45 minutes. At the end of each interview, I asked participants whether they knew of others in the industry who would be interested in participating or if they could send my flyer and information to those they believe would be interested in participating in my study.

**Table 1. Participant Overview**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Years in Industry</b>
Adam	Male	White	3 years
Lauren	Female	White	8 years
Hannah	Female	White	6 years
Peter	Male	Asian	6 years
Alex	Male	White	5 years
Oliver	Male	Asian	5 years
Natalie	Female	Hispanic	5 years
Celine	Female	Hispanic	5 years
Noah	Male	Asian	5 years
Michael	Male	Black	3 years
Amanda	Female	Black	3 years

### **C. Interview Guide**

Appendix A contains my interview guide that I followed when interviewing participants. My main questions are on interactions and how status characteristics along with power and legitimacy may have affected customer interactions. The goal is to examine flight attendants' perceptions on customer interactions and whether there is a difference in experiences between men and women flight attendants along with examining the extent to which certain factors shape gendered experiences. The first block of questions focuses on general questions about respondents' experiences in the industry, such as why they decided to become a flight attendant and their typical day at work. The second block of questions focuses on questions on interactions with customers in general, such as typical interactions they experience as well as the best and worst interactions they have experienced so far. The third block of questions focuses on personal

characteristics and whether respondents feel that certain characteristics have an effect on the interactions they experience. Originally this block of questions focused on asking about gender specifically, however, the questions were changed to be more broad so that participants were allowed to interpret the question and answer with what characteristic(s) were salient to them and their experiences. The fourth block of questions wraps up the interview, asking respondents about their concluding thoughts on being a flight attendant followed by demographics questions.

#### **D. Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were conducted, I used NVIVO to code and transcribe them. I did two rounds of coding using open coding for the first round and axial coding for the second as well as iterative and flexible coding as my codes were also based on pre-existing theory. I used open coding for the first round to make note of key topics talked about throughout the interviews and I used axial coding for the second round to look for patterns between the open codes to break down which ones are central to my research question (Gordon 2019). Strauss and Corbin (1998) posit that open coding is the step in which you develop concepts, such as using the transcriptions of the interviews to develop concepts that organize the data more clearly. Strauss and Corbin (1998) posit that axial coding is the step in which the concepts developed in open coding move to “higher-order” where you now categorize the concepts. In this round of coding, “attempts are made to find some relationship among the concepts obtained through open coding” (pg. 61).

In addition to open and axial coding, I also did memoing in order to analyze my data further. Priya (2016) posits that memoing is “where the researcher pens down his/her ideas about the data as they occur during coding and analysis” (p. 61). As I went through my coding process, I made notes of which interviews and themes had overlaps with one another. For instance, when recollections of experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic came up amongst interviews, I

made note of how the pandemic was a factor that was brought up frequently with each participant even when questions on the pandemic were not especially asked.

The organization of my interview guide helped me in operationalizing status characteristics theory and legitimacy theory as there are questions written that addressed each theory. For example, the third block of questions in the interview guide that asks about personal characteristics in interactions helped me to find trends and patterns amongst participants when discussing certain characteristics, such as gender and sexuality. Additionally, there were certain terms and words that I used in my questions that helped me to operationalize each theory. As discussed, the questions addressing status characteristics theory asked about personal characteristics and similarly, the questions addressing legitimacy theory asked about feelings of powerful/powerlessness in interactions. This helped in my coding and analysis as I was able to quickly identify areas of each interview where personal characteristics and feelings of power were being discussed because I knew where I asked those questions in my interview guide.

## **Results**

The results of this study provide insights about how men and women flight attendants perceive and make sense of customer interactions. While this study focuses on gendered interactions, other status characteristics were mentioned among participants as well. The sections to follow will address three key points: (1) differences in how men and women perceive customer interactions, (2) the extent to which status and status characteristics play a role in customer interactions, and (3) the extent to which power and legitimacy are present between customers and flight attendants.

### **A. Perceptions of Customer Interactions**

Participants were first asked about their interactions with customers in a general sense to understand their perceptions of their own experiences. When talking about their experiences, whether positive or negative, women flight attendants were more likely to acknowledge how personal characteristics affected interactions, whether through experiences of their own or experiences they have seen with others. Women flight attendants were also more likely to express experiencing more negative feelings and emotions when interacting with customers. Although women flight attendants did acknowledge when customers have left them feeling positive emotions, most interactions and experiences recalled by women flight attendants ended up being expressed in negative emotions, such as emotions of feeling drained, angry, and frustrated.

A common topic brought up that elicited some of the negative emotions amongst the women flight attendants interviewed was the feeling of being treated as waitresses or servants. Lauren stated, “It’s almost like you wish the plane would drop about 10,000 feet really fast and they’d have to do something and need us in order to realize that’s really what we’re there for...

Every customer treats us as a... as a waitress or a bartender. No one respects the fact that we're only there for their safety." Flight attendants not only go through extensive training in regard to customer service, but they have recurrent trainings each year to make sure they are still qualified and prepared to help in cases of emergencies whenever they happen. However, due to the fact that most flights operate without any issues, customers mostly see the customer service parts of being a flight attendant rather than the safety aspect of their job as well. Therefore, through Lauren's recollection, she feels that the actual purpose of her job is overlooked and undervalued.

These experiences of not being valued were especially heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic that started toward the beginning of 2020. Participants mentioned tensions rising with customers in regard to enforcing the mask mandate during flights. Natalie stated, "COVID hit and then we became the mask police... Us becoming the mask police and kicking people out because they refuse to wear their mask, passengers started seeing us as like their enemy instead of someone who's on this plane for your safety." In this case, even when flight attendants are enforcing rules for passengers' safety when environmental factors have impacted flights, flight attendants still receive pushback from customers.

Additionally, although men flight attendants also acknowledged feeling negative emotions with certain customer interactions as well, they were more likely to focus on and recall interactions that ended up being expressed in positive emotions. Men flight attendants were also more likely to acknowledge how the flight itself affected interactions, such as the flight and routes being worked and the nature of their job in general. When asked about his interactions with customers in general, Alex said, "I definitely have more good interactions than bad. A lot of them are just very baseline... I completely understand especially when your flight leaves at 5:30 a.m. and likewise if it's 11:30 p.m., so it's depending on the situation." When asked about more

negative interactions, Alex mentioned that these types of interactions happen “when it’s accompanied by something a little bit more serious, like a medical or mechanical... It’s easier for me to not react to their thing and just be very direct.” In Alex’s case, regardless of whether it is a good or bad interaction, the interaction depended on factors of the flight, such as the time of day or what happened on the flight. Both Alex and Michael recalled having more good interactions than bad ones. Michael mentioned, “I would say that I experience more good interactions. Even when I have an off day or have a negative interaction with a customer, as soon as I have a good one it usually trumps the bad...The good interactions are the reason why I love what I do.”

Therefore, the difference between that of Lauren’s and Natalie’s experiences to that of Alex’s and Michael’s is that although both men and women flight attendants acknowledged experiencing good and bad customer interactions, women flight attendants were more likely to recall having more negative customer interactions and men flight attendants were more likely to recall having more positive customer interactions.

### **B. Status Characteristics in Customer Interactions**

After participants were asked about their interactions with customers in general, I asked them how they believed personal characteristics affected their interactions as well. As mentioned previously, status characteristics create expectations in how individuals are expected to behave (Berger et al. 1972). When asked the question, the intent was to keep the question broad so that participants were allowed the ability to interpret which characteristics were salient to them and their interactions rather than asking about specific characteristics or traits. Although this study intended to focus on gendered interactions, participants in the study have brought forth other personal characteristics that affect interactions as well, whether in their own interactions or in other interactions that they have witnessed. As mentioned previously, women flight attendants



were more likely to acknowledge how status characteristics affect their interactions whereas men were more likely to recall how factors of the flight affect their interactions.

In regard to gender, Peter, one of the only men flight attendants to acknowledge how status characteristics affect interactions, mentioned that masculinity plays a significant role when it comes to the interactions between men flight attendants and men customers. "...It's the same sex that will threaten each other versus the other way around. There's a male flight attendant and they get into it with a male customer and then you see this like masculinity side... 'Well I'm gonna take you down.'" In regard to women flight attendants, Peter mentioned that he noticed women flight attendants experience more physical assault. "Especially with the male customers and the female flight attendants. It's more of like the unwanted touches and the unwanted flirting..." In this case, Peter's recollection of how gender affects interactions shows that in some interactions for men flight attendants, it is more likely to be verbal in regard to masculinity. However, for women flight attendants, some interactions are more physical.

As an individual who identifies as male, Peter also talked about how he noticed his own gender affected his interactions with customers. "If I'm the only male person in the crew, I notice that I get treated differently and I'm usually taken more seriously than other flight attendants." In regard to completing the same tasks as his women co-workers, such as asking customers to put their laptops away during landing, Peter noticed there is a difference in how customers react to when women flight attendants ask versus when he asks. Peter mentioned that customers will sometimes roll their eyes when women flight attendants ask, but then when he asks the same questions, "they start complying... I've noticed that when people just assume that I'm like, you know, male, they tend to treat me more seriously than other flight attendants who identify as female." Therefore, gender affects interactions with customers not only in how customers and

flight attendants interact with one another, but also in how customers legitimate and comply with the flight attendant based on their gender.

In addition to one's gender, individuals' sexuality also affect interactions with customers. While Peter mentioned how men customers interact with men flight attendants, Lauren adds that there is a similar negative interaction in regard to sexuality. "I have definitely heard men treat other flight attendants that are gay men as horrible. Judgmental. Not wanting that gay man to help them. Doesn't matter what color he is, it's the fact that he's gay. So they want me to bring their drink to them and set it down for them instead of this gay gentleman who is fantastic..." In this case, the interaction extends to the customer not wanting to interact with the flight attendant at all. In Peter's recollection of gendered interactions between men customers and men flight attendants, an interaction still occurred. However, when men customers perceive and assume men flight attendants' sexuality, they refuse for there to be any interaction at all. Lauren stated, "I still feel like that's one of those things that they have sold with the job... Skinny women, tall, in a dress, in heels. And some dude that spent all this money just sitting first class is expecting some hot looking flight attendant to come bring his drink, not a gay guy." In this case, Lauren alludes to the history of the career of a flight attendant being predominantly occupied by women. Therefore, when customers notice and receive customer service that is different from what has historically been the norm, there is pushback from the customer.

In regard to social class, Adam and Noah talked about how the positions they work during certain flights affects their interactions. Noah, the flight attendant that was recently trained in handling customers in first class, talked about how there is a difference in interactions when dealing with first class customers versus customers in economy. He said, "For first class we're expected to treat them like they're the CEO, but that's not the case with those in

economy... I mean, obviously we're supposed to care for everyone in general, but they place such a like, huge emphasis on making sure we're taking care of our first class customers. So sometimes it's intimidating because it feels like... like they have more power even over myself as the flight attendant caring for them because there's more pressure from the airline to perform at a higher standard." Therefore, for Adam, because there are higher expectations set with the airline to care for their first class customers, he feels as though the power lies more with them than it does for customers in economy, which is a standard set by the airline itself. Adam mentioned, "It depends on what the situation is. It's like if I'm doing boarding and I'm in the aisle and I have to tell, I have to ask somebody to take their backpack out so I can make space for a larger carry on... Working a beverage cart and having to be in the aisle during boarding, there's a lot that can go wrong."

Similarly, because Noah got trained more recently to work the first class section, he mentioned, "There's definitely a difference between interacting with those in first class versus economy. There's even a different, there's certain trainings you have every year just to make sure that you're interacting with first class passengers in a different way than you would with those in economy." In Adam's and Noah's cases, rather than focusing more on how status characteristics affect their interactions, certain aspects of their job resonated more with them when recalling their interactions with customers which was the case amongst most of the men flight attendants that were interviewed.

### **C. Power and Legitimacy in Customer Interactions**

What is interesting about the relationship between flight attendants and customers is where the role of legitimacy and authority lie, which according to those interviewed, is also different for women flight attendants as it is for men flight attendants. Della Fave (1980) uses

resources to explain that individuals with higher levels of self-evaluation will view themselves as deserving of high levels of resources and vice-versa. This is then legitimized because it is what we believe we deserve. However, Della Fave (1980) also mentioned that when the distribution of resources and self-evaluations become incompatible, “the more likely is the delegitimation of stratification” (pg. 964). On the other hand, Hegtvedt and Johnson (2009) look at legitimation in authority through power and exchange, where when the authority’s power is used in fairness, it is then legitimized and thus results in compliance from those with lesser power. Therefore, legitimacy helps us to understand the effects of power and status in several ways. At the organizational level, when power is enabling, it is then legitimized. This means that when power is allowed and is understood between those involved, it is legitimized. However, when power is coercive, it is “likely to be met with resistance and even opposition at times” (Hegtvedt and Johnson, 2009). This means that when power is forced and not understood between those involved, delegitimation and resistance to that power occurs.

Taking the relationship between flight attendants and customers into account, legitimacy and authority bounces back and forth between the two depending on the interaction where the customer or the flight attendant may perceive their individual actions as justified. As relative to Della Fave’s (1980) argument, customers or flight attendants with higher levels of self-evaluation will perceive themselves as deserving of high levels of resources. However, this concept becomes complicated in the relationship between flight attendants and customers because both actors may perceive their roles as deserving of higher levels of resources which in turn results in conflict. When the customer undervalues the job of a flight attendant, they will perceive themselves as having more power or control. When the flight attendant values their job

and sees the importance of their role, they will perceive themselves as having more power or control in the situation.

In both Lauren's and Natalie's recollections as mentioned earlier, feelings of frustration and tiredness became apparent when interacting with customers due to the fact that customers did not see the job of a flight attendant for anything other than that of catering to the customer. This may be due to the fact that customer service jobs in general tend to be highly undervalued even though such jobs play crucial roles in the economy. Due to customer service jobs being undervalued, this allows customers to assume that they have more power and control over those who work in the service industry. Therefore, when value gets placed into the kind of job that one occupies, the individual themselves becomes tied into that value as well. In the case of Lauren and Natalie, because their job as a flight attendant is mostly seen as a customer service job rather than a job of security for customers, individuals are likely to assume that they have more power and control due to the job being undervalued. These instances also exemplify how one's status can be tied to their job where regardless of who that person is as an individual, their job becomes a means of defining their status and values. Therefore, women flight attendants were more likely to perceive the customer interactions they experience through the emotions that the interactions elicit and how their status is perceived by the customer.

Lauren mentioned feeling powerless when dealing with customers. "I was scared my job was gonna be at mercy versus telling this gentleman what to do because what he had done to me... Even if I'm doing the exact right thing from start to finish, I'm still going to be questioned and I'm still going to be accused that no matter what, it was my fault because the customer's always right." In this case, Lauren feels powerless in certain situations, leading her to feel that she has less control. Even when she feels that she follows the company's policies, she feels that

regardless, the customer will continue to have more power and control due to a fear of losing her job. Her feelings of being scared and anxious of losing her job might also be explained by feelings of her job being devalued and her role delegitimated from constantly being questioned by customers.

In another interaction, Celine recalled a time where she was asking a customer to remove his bag from the overhead bin and put it underneath the seat in front of him because she mentioned it was a small bag that could have gone underneath the seat to make space for bigger bags. She said, “I just said ‘hey sir, I just need this underneath the seat,’ and he just started going, ‘oh that’s my f\*\*\*\*\* space, I’m f\*\*\*\*\* entitled to that.’ So you go down to their level and I’m like, you have two options, either you take it out or you can take the next flight. So he ended up like just grabbing it and put it underneath the seat.” In this case, the perceived power shifted from the customer to the flight attendant. The customer viewed his actions of placing his bag in the overhead bin as justified or right, but after the customer reacted to what he was being asked, Celine reacted in a way to where she had to exert more power and dominance. In doing so, the customer complied with what was being asked, similar to Hegvedt and Johnson’s argument (2009) in that when power is legitimized, it results in compliance.

Whenever customers have any questions or issues with their flights, Oliver mentioned, “there are an insurmountable amount of people that believe that flight attendants can do absolutely anything to fix any problem ever with the airline. Like I can’t call the gates to protect your connection. I can’t tell the pilots to call them ‘cause they can’t do it either. Like if you want a wheelchair when you land, I can do that for you... but I can’t resolve your connection issues, I can’t rebook you onto your next flight. When they realize you’re not able to do these things for them because it’s out of your control and beyond the scope of your job, they get upset.”

What is interesting of Oliver's experience is that in his recollection, customers view him as having control and power in helping them resolve flight issues even though that is not the case, therefore, they legitimize his job as a flight attendant. However, when he expresses that he does not have the ability to do certain things, customers then devalue and delegitimize his power and role as a flight attendant. What is different of Oliver's recollections from that of Lauren's and Celine's is that, similar to what was discussed in previous sections, Oliver and Noah brought up instances in which their interactions occurred based on aspects of their job, whereas Lauren and Celine talked about difficult interactions that made them feel more stress and conflict.

These feelings of powerlessness and less sense of control are more prevalent in the more negative and worse interactions, however, in regard to the more positive and better interactions, participants expressed feeling more or equal amounts of control between themselves and the customer where there is more of a mutual understanding of where the role of legitimacy lies. Similar to what was discussed in previous sections, although men and women flight attendants recalled experiencing both positive and negative interactions, women flight attendants were more likely to associate their interactions with an emotion and men flight attendants were more likely to focus solely on how their job as a flight attendant might affect their interactions. Therefore, when women flight attendants associated an interaction with a positive emotion, they were more likely to experience more feelings of legitimacy because they were more likely to be treated with respect. In this case, when the role of power was understood between both the flight attendant and the customer, the flight attendant was more likely to experience feeling legitimized.

When associating an interaction with negative emotions, women flight attendants were more likely to experience less feelings of legitimacy as the role of power was not understood between the flight attendant and the customer, therefore, the interaction was met with resistance.

In this case, for women flight attendants, perceptions of legitimacy also often lied in whether or not there was a mutual understanding of who was in charge or had the power. When women flight attendants recalled feeling like servants to customers and not being respected or acknowledged for being there for customers' safety, they felt that they were delegitimated as their power and authority was not being respected. When men flight attendants associated an interaction with the flight being worked, they were more likely to experience more feelings of legitimacy when they experienced more control or power depending on the position or flight being worked.

The differences in how men and women flight attendants recalled what was more salient to them might also be explained by how powerful or powerless certain situations and interactions made them feel and the extent to which they felt that their role was legitimated. For instance, for women flight attendants, acknowledging how status characteristics affect their interactions and the emotions that these interactions make them feel shows how they feel more or less power and legitimacy depending on the interaction. When women flight attendants associated an interaction with a positive emotion, they were more likely to experience more feelings of legitimacy because they were more likely to be treated with respect. When men flight attendants associated an interaction with the flight being worked, they were more likely to experience more feelings of legitimacy when they experienced more control or power depending on the position or flight being worked.



## **Discussion and Conclusion**

It is important to note that the perceptions discussed in this study are only from the flight attendants interviewed, therefore, the findings of this study discuss how the flight attendant experiences the interaction. Smith (1995) posits that the Thomas Theorem states that “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (pg. 12). In this case, the flight attendants interviewed for this study recalled their experiences in ways that made sense to them as they were the ones that lived it. Therefore, the analyses from the data are based on what the participants chose to share and discuss from their own lived experiences.

The findings of this study shows that there are differences in how men and women flight attendants make sense of their interactions. Women were more likely to express having more negative experiences and how status characteristics affect their interactions while men flight attendants were more likely to express having more positive experiences and how aspects of their job affect interactions. The findings of this study in the differences in why men and women flight attendants perceptions’ about customer interactions differ is explained through status characteristics theory and legitimacy theory.

A pattern of the recollections amongst the women flight attendants interviewed in this study was feeling that they were expected to cater to customers in the form of being a waitress and feeling powerless in situations due to their job and role not being legitimized. A pattern of the recollections amongst the men flight attendants interviewed in this study was feeling that expectations and legitimacy depended on flights and the nature of their job. These expectations that both men and women flight attendants experienced can be explained by how individuals with different status characteristics are expected to perform in different ways especially in social interactions. When customer service jobs in general are already highly undervalued, this gives

customers the perception that they have more control and higher status. When customers have these perceptions, expectations are then created due to the role that they perceive that they play.

Ridgeway et al. (1998) posit that such status characteristics and expectations have effects on influence and power amongst individuals in which interactions take place. Therefore, in regard to interactions that take place between flight attendants and customers, most customers may view themselves as having more status and power in the interaction due to customer service jobs being underappreciated. This then leads to how men and women flight attendants have made sense of their interactions because their perceptions on their job as a flight attendant show that they value their job and their role, therefore, when they experience that customers do not share this same value, it causes tension in which individuals will elicit certain behaviors. When women flight attendants expressed feeling like waitresses to customers even though they viewed their jobs as crucial for customers' safety, this created a difference in perceptions between how women flight attendants view their interactions versus how customers might view their interactions. On the other hand, when men flight attendants expressed feeling like they were expected to be able to fix every airline issue in general even though it was out of their control, this also created a difference in perceptions between how men flight attendants perceive their interactions versus how customers might perceive their interactions. This is due to the fact that status characteristics affect expectations and behaviors which play out in social interactions.

To explain how men and women flight attendants make sense of their interactions even further, the values and beliefs that individuals have about who has more power based on status characteristics has also affected such perceptions. Building off of status characteristics theory, actions and behaviors are legitimized when individuals perceive actions and behaviors as justified. When individuals are perceived to have more status and power, their behaviors are

more likely to be justified. Johnson et al. (1998) and Zelditch (2001) mention that something is legitimated when there is a shared understanding of what makes something right which is usually based on an agreement amongst individuals. When there is a general consensus on what is perceived as justified, it will usually lead to compliance from others. In this case, when women flight attendants expressed feeling negative emotions when dealing with difficult customer interactions, this was also due to their role not being legitimized, therefore customers did not view them as having more control or power which led to customers not complying with certain requests. When they expressed feeling positive emotions when having better interactions with customers, they were more likely to experience feelings of legitimacy because they received more compliance from customers as their job as a flight attendant was legitimated. When men flight attendants mentioned having to navigate between interacting with customers in different sections of the plane or during planing and deboarding, their feelings of legitimacy shifted between when they felt that they had more or less power based on their positions. Therefore, their feelings of authority and power depended on the characteristics of the flight and which positions they worked on each flight.

This study and the explanations of status characteristics theory and legitimacy theory suggest that there are several factors in how men and women flight attendants make sense of their interactions and that there is a difference in how they perceive their interactions in general. While this study aims to add on to existing literature on gendered experiences in the workplaces, it also aims to highlight how expectations and power from both status characteristics theory and legitimacy theory shape how individuals behave and are also treated overall. The results of this study extends the theories discussed as such theories are usually tested in lab environments. This study extends such theories because rather than testing through labs, the data was collected using

interviews. This study also adds on to the limited existing literature on employee perceptions of customer interactions as prior literature have focused more on perceptions customer perceptions. This study gives insight on how men and women in the airline industry make sense of their interactions which may be similar or different than those in other jobs within the service industry.

Limitations from this study include analyzing data from a smaller sample size as the study was done for a Master's thesis. A larger sample size might yield different results due to the fact that recruiting a larger sample size would be more representative of those in the airline industry. The data in this study were analyzed using interview material from 11 participants, however, having a larger sample size and more data might have shown more similar or more different patterns amongst participants. However, the data collected for this study still elicits important findings as patterns and trends were still brought forth amongst interviews as I was generating and testing theory. Additionally, recruitment was done using a convenience sampling method with relations to those who are currently in the aviation industry, therefore, participants were recruited based on relationships I had with friends and family who are already in the industry. Future research should examine the extent to which the airline that one works might have an affect on interactions, including whether perceptions of customer interactions might differ amongst flight attendants that work in different international airlines as well. Different airlines have different policies and procedures, therefore flight attendants may be trained differently in how to interact with customers. Future research should also delve more into how other status characteristics, such as sexuality and social class as touched on in this study, may affect customer interactions.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

*Thank you for your time today. I would like to start with a couple of general questions about being a flight attendant.*

- 1) Thinking back to when you first started this job, what drew you to become a flight attendant?
- 2) How would you describe a typical day at work?
  - a) What would you say is the main task you are typically focused on?
  - b) What would you say is the most difficult aspect of your job?
- 3) What are the qualities that make a good flight attendant?
- 4) How would you describe your relationships with your colleagues?

### **Interactions**

*Now we're going to talk about some of the interactions you've had with customers since you became a flight attendant.*

- 5) Tell me about the best interaction that you've ever had with a customer.
  - a) **Probe:** Can you tell me about what led up to that interaction?
  - b) **Probe:** Who was involved?
  - c) **Probe:** What happened and what was the end result?
  - d) **Probe:** How did it make you feel?
  - e) **Probe:** How often do you experience these kinds of interactions?
  - f) **Probe:** How powerful or powerless did you feel in this situation?
  - g) **Probe:** In your opinion, who was driving the situation?
  - h) **Probe:** To what extent did you feel like you had to manage your emotions?
- 6) Tell me about the worst interaction that you've ever had with a customer.
  - a) **Probe:** Can you tell me about what led up to that interaction?
  - b) **Probe:** Who was involved?
  - c) **Probe:** What happened and what was the end result?
  - d) **Probe:** How did it make you feel?
  - e) **Probe:** How often do you experience these kinds of interactions?
  - f) **Probe:** How powerful or powerless did you feel in this situation?
  - g) **Probe:** Did you feel justified in your interactions with the customer?
  - h) **Probe:** In your opinion, who was driving the situation?
  - i) **Probe:** To what extent did you feel like you had to manage your emotions?
  - j) **Probe:** How do you navigate dealing with a difficult customer?
  - k) **Probe:** What are the common issues that customers usually have?
  - l) **Probe:** Have you ever experienced a customer being verbally abusive towards you? If so, can you explain what happened?
  - m) **Probe:** Have you ever experienced a customer being physically abusive towards you? If so, can you explain what happened?



- 7) How would you describe the interactions you've had with customers overall?

### **Characteristics**

*Now we're going to dig a bit deeper and look at how personal characteristics may affect interactions.*

- 8) Have you ever felt that different aspects of your identity influenced your interactions with customers?
- a) **Probe:** Can you tell me about a time where this has happened?
  - b) **Probe:** How did this make you feel?
  - c) **Probe:** Why do you think this influenced your interactions?
  - d) **Probe:** Are there certain aspects of your identity that you find influence your interactions more than others?
- 9) Have you ever noticed a time where your colleagues were being treated unfairly due to their identity?

### **Wrap-Up Questions**

- 10) Have you ever thought about leaving this job? Why or why not?
- 11) What is your least favorite thing about being a flight attendant?
- 12) What is your most favorite thing about being a flight attendant?
- 13) Is there anything that you think is important to understand about your experiences as a flight attendant that we haven't touched on?
- 14) Do you have any questions for me?

### **Demographics:**

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your race/ethnicity?
3. In what year were you born?
4. What airline do you currently work for?
  - a. Have you worked for another airline before?
5. How long have you been a flight attendant?
  - a. What airport are you based out of?