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## AGE AND TRUST IN FLIGHT ATTENDANTS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

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It is important for passengers to trust their flight attendants, especially in case of an emergency. There is ongoing debate in India regarding trust and the lowering of retirement age, which is currently mandatory at 58 years in flight attendants. Some believe this is in order to acquire younger, more attractive flight attendants. The current study asked 384 Indians and Americans to rate their trust in flight attendants based on an emergency situation. Results showed that Indians trusted the younger flight attendants (25 years old) more than their older counterparts (55 years old). These findings have theoretical and practical implications in the ongoing debate. A future intention of the researchers is to conduct a mediation analysis to determine if affect is a possible mediator.

This study looks to analyze the consumer's trust in flight attendants. It analyzes cross-cultural data from India and the U.S. Increases in scheduled flights have caused a shortage in the number of flight attendants. Passengers have the closest interaction with their flight attendants and therefore, understanding consumer perceptions is of utmost importance.

Today, the retirement age in India is 58 years, while the United States has no age restriction. Whereas, 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). Culture is one of the factors that helps us explain these differences. (Chen and Staroata, 1998) defined culture as "pattern of shared basic assumptions of society according to national, organizational, regional, ethical, religious, linguistic, and social characteristics". Hofstede (1980, 2001) found that Thai, Chinese, and Indian cultures displayed high levels of collectivism. The difference between India as collectivist and the United States as individualistic has been acknowledged and documented by previous research (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). India is in general a collectivistic culture but may also exhibit individualistic features (Rice et al. 2014). Collectivists are taught to trust. Persons born into individualistic cultures however, are taught to be independent of one another and to not trust without questioning (Han & Shavitt, 1994).

Other factors that help us understand tendencies towards aging flight attendants, is age and gender. Even though gender is a factor in this study, the effect of age is more pronounced. Prejudice on the basis of age is known as ageism. It has not been found that an individual's job performance can be predicted based on their age (Cleveland & Landy, 1983). Meta-analytical reviews have shown that older adults are devalued and perceived to have lower competence (Kite & Johnson, 1988; Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). When reviewing previous research on gender differences, it is evident that cultural differences influence gender perceptions. Jackman and Senter (1981) found that 78 percent of men believed that women are not emotionally equal to men. 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), this is due to India's patriarchal nature.

Trust has an important role to play in this study. For the purpose of this study trust is defined as "expectation of technically competent role performance" (Barber, 1983, p. 14). Studies suggest that stigmas could have an effect on trust. As per the social identity theory, people are biased towards their 'in-group', or the group that they identify themselves within.

### **Current Study**

The study aimed to understand the trust dynamic between passengers and flight attendants. This relationship is an under-analyzed sector of the scientific community. Participants were asked to respond to a hypothetical situation. Age and gender of the flight attendants were manipulated as a part of the hypothetical situation and ratings of trustworthiness were collected from Indian and American participants. The research predictions were as follows:

- 1) There would be differences in trust ratings based on the country of origin of the participant.
- 2) There would be differences in trust ratings based on the age of the target flight attendant in the scenarios.
- 3) There would be differences in trust ratings based on the gender of the target flight attendant in the scenarios.

### **Methods**

*Participants:* Three hundred and eighty-four (135 females) from India and the United States participated in this study and the number of participants per country was equal. 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:* First, the participants were asked to fill out a consent form and given instructions. A hypothetical question about a commercial airline was asked. The participants were told that the flight attendants were 25 and 55-year-old male and 25 and 55-year-old female followed by questions such as "How do you feel", "How much do you trust the flight attendant in an emergency situation?" and "How trustworthy do you think this flight attendant would be in an emergency situation?" The responses were collected along three different Likert-type scales from Extremely negative/unfavorable/bad to Extremely positive/favorable/good and Extremely negative/unfavorable/bad to Extremely positive/favorable/good. There was a zero neutral option for each scale. The participants were then asked for demographic 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; and 3) Country of origin of the participants. The dependent variable was the participants' trust scores.

## Results

A Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted on the data which was combined for further analysis due to high scores of internal consistency for Trust ( $r$  range from = .84 to .97). Trust data was subjected to a three-way ANOVA with Age and Gender of the flight attendant, and Country of origin of the participants as the factors. A main effect of Age,  $F(1, 376) = 5.05, p = .025, \text{partial-eta squared} = .01$ , and Country,  $F(1, 376) = 36.25, p < .001, \text{partial-eta squared} = .09$  was found which were qualified by a significant interaction between Age and Country,  $F(1, 376) = 29.28, p < .001, \text{partial-eta squared} = .07$ . No other significant effects were found. As in Figure 2, both nationalities trusted younger flight attendants equally while Americans trusted older flight attendants more. Post hoc tests showed that trust dropped as a function of Age for Indians, but went up for Americans (all  $ps < .05$ ).

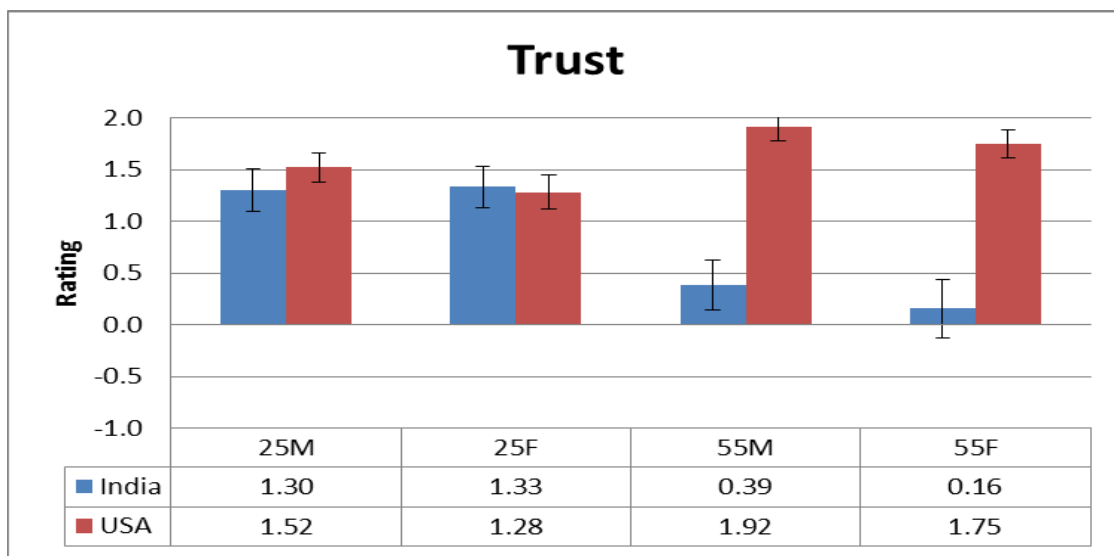


Figure 1. Trust data from the experiment. SE bars are included.

## Discussion

The study was conducted in order to understand cultural differences and perceptions towards ageing flight attendants. The researchers predicted that there would be statistically significant differences in trust ratings when analyzing the country of origin of the participant, and the age of the flight attendants. The results showed a main effect of culture and country of origin, which supported the first and second hypotheses. The study found that Americans trusted older flight attendants more than their counterparts from India. One explanation for this is that Americans believed that 55 year olds would be better at handling most situations due to their experience. Indians on the other hand trusted younger (25 year old) flight attendants more than their American counterparts. It is possible that Americans view flight attendants as responsible for onboard safety whereas Indians view them more in terms of onboard service. What strikes as interesting is that collectivist cultures such as Indians view their elders in high regard. This would have implied that Indian participants would have more faith in the older flight attendants, and so these findings are insightful for commercial air service operators. The third hypothesis

predicted by the researchers stated that there would be differences in trust ratings as a function of gender of the target flight attendant in the scenarios. The results of the study however failed to support the predictions and suggested that there was no statistically significant differences in trust ratings as a function of the flight attendants' gender. Even though it was initially hypothesized that people would stereotype flight attendants as young females, it was interesting to note that participants felt that both genders were equally capable of fulfilling the role of a flight attendant.

### **Practical Implications and Limitations**

Since aviation is hugely dependent on its consumers, their perceptions hold value. This study shows the growing sentiment against ageing flight attendants that is rampant in India and how it is fuelled by emotion. The study also looks to identify gender and age preferences. This could help airlines in personnel placement and help educating passengers about air safety. Moreover, future research could help track consumer perceptions over time.

This study is subject to certain limitations. First being that Amazon's Mechanical Turk was used to collect data. The experimenter therefore has no control over the environment. Conversely, previous research has suggested that Mturk data is as reliable as data collected in a laboratory setting (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Germine, et al., 2012). Moreover, the participants were compensated for the survey. This could affect their mindset and motivation for completing the survey.

Aviation is a global industry and involves almost every country on the planet. This research only analyzes perceptions of participants from two countries, India and the United States. For this reason, the study cannot generalize its inferences to the entire industry. Future research should attempt to collect data from several other countries, cultures and regions to enhance the understanding of these consumer perceptions. In addition, another future avenue for research lies in attempting to understand the reason behind such decisions of the participants. One possible method doing so would be to replicate this study with the addition of a mediation analysis. A possible mediator could be that of affect, which would imply that the decisions of the participants were based on emotions.

### **Conclusion**

The study is aimed at further understanding the mindset of the travelling public, and the complex relationships that affect their trust in different aspects of the aviation industry operations, in this case the trust in the flight attendants. The purpose of this study was also to examine cross-cultural differences in trust of flight attendants using Indian and American participants. The study showed that Indians trusted older flight attendants more than the older counterparts. Conversely, it was seen that Americans trusted older flight attendants more. These findings have practical implications to the aviation industry. While these findings are important, they will serve as the basis for the researchers to analyze whether emotions (affect) mediates the relationship between the condition and trust.

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