Alzbeta Vreckova
Middlesex University Dubai

Cody Morris Paris
Middlesex University Dubai

Heather Jeffrey
Middlesex University Dubai

A gender analysis of intercultural sensitivity among flight attendants

Due to the nature of gender as a social construct, it is commonly believed that women are more sensitive than men and are therefore more suited to certain employment positions, such as those customer facing roles in the hospitality industry. Little empirical evidence supports this idea, but this commonly held assumption may be part of the reason why flight attendants are predominantly women. To test intercultural sensitivity between women and men flight attendants, this paper explored intercultural sensitivity in a sample of 204 flight attendants in the Middle East. According to the results, women expressed more intercultural sensitivity in four out of five factors. These findings should help airlines design training for flight attendants, where they may have to undo gender.

Keywords: flight attendants; gender; intercultural sensitivity; aviation

Alzbeta Vreckova
Middlesex University Dubai
Email: vreckova.alzbeta@gmail.com

Cody Morris Paris
Middlesex University Dubai
Knowledge Park, Block 16
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Email: c.paris@mdx.ac.ae

Heather Jeffrey
Middlesex University Dubai
Knowledge Park, Block 16
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Email: h.jeffrey@mdx.ac.ae

Alzbeta Vreckova is a recent Middlesex University graduate with a Master's degree in International Tourism Management. Alzbeta currently works as an international flight attendant for one of the prominent airlines in the Middle East and has over ten years of experience in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Cody Morris Paris is the Deputy Director for Academic Planning and Research and Associate Professor of Social Science at Middlesex University Dubai. He completed his PhD from Arizona State University, and is a research fellow at the University of Johannesburg.

Heather Jeffrey is a lecturer in social sciences at Middlesex University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Heather's research interests lie in tourism and social inequalities, and her PhD research focused on women and tourism in Tunisia.

Introduction

Gender is a social construct based on stereotypes assigned to biological sex categories and achieved through performance (Butler, 1988), which is profoundly important to the hospitality and tourism industries as they have grown out of and benefitted from the stereotype of what it means to be a woman (Enloe, 2000; Ferguson, 2011). Women are thought to be, expected to be, and sometimes 'choose' to behave in ways sensitive to others' positions, a characteristic demanded by the emotional labour required in people-facing roles. Some proponents of sex-role theories believe that this is an inherent difference between men and women (see, for example, Eagly & Wood, 2016), but others would argue that any difference is a process of socialization and consequence of the social construction of gender (Butler, 1988; Rippon, 2019).

Intercultural sensitivity is a significant competence for the hospitality service encounter providers found in the passenger airline industry. Intercultural sensitivity had already been described as a necessity for survival in the contemporary world by Chen and Starosta as far back as 1996. The authors explained the need for recognizing this competence due to communication and transportation technology development, increased globalization, population migration, multiculturalism itself, and ethnic and gender differences within the USA. Reviewing the literature, Chen and Starosta (1998) developed a definition that diverged from previous thought in that he treated the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects as distinct but related components. For Chen and Starosta (1998: 5), 'intercultural awareness

(cognition) is the foundation of intercultural sensitivity (affect) which, in turn, leads to intercultural competence (behavior),' more specifically they define intercultural sensitivity as the ability to 'project and receive positive emotional responses, before, during, and after intercultural interaction.' Intercultural sensitivity includes six elements: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgement (Chen and Starosta, 1998).

Intercultural sensitivity is important for interpersonal skills and service attentiveness, unsurprisingly it can have a significant impact on revenue contribution (Nyaupane, Paris, and Teye, 2011), but it also plays a role in job and social satisfaction (Sizoo et al., 2004). Intercultural sensitivity is a skill that can be gained, learned (Nyaupane, Paris, and Teye, 2010), practiced, and measured. In an attempt to measure intercultural sensitivity, Chen and Starosta (2000) introduced a 24 item scale with five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The first factor, interaction engagement, groups items related to the participant's feelings towards intercultural interaction; the second factor, respect for cultural differences, grouped items related to the participant's attitude towards the culture of the Other; interaction confidence is concerned with participant's confidence in intercultural contexts; the fourth factor is related to the participant's reaction towards intercultural communication; and the final factor is concerned with the participant's effort in attempting to understand the interaction (Chen and Starosta, 2000).

Research utilizing the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale has been primarily focused on education contexts and has highlighted gendered differences in intercultural sensitivity apparent from as early as fourth grade in the USA (Mellizo, 2017). At an undergraduate level, women scored higher than men in Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, and Interaction Attentiveness (Tompkins, Cook, Miller & LePeau, 2017). Interestingly in a

sample of Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students, male participants reported higher intercultural sensitivity, specifically for Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, and Interaction Confidence (Moradi and Ghabanchi, 2019). According to Nieto and Booth's (2010) study, there was a significant difference regarding gender and the intercultural sensitivity of university instructors and students. More specifically, there were differences in interaction engagement (feelings towards intercultural interaction) between men and women instructors. Research into intercultural sensitivity within hospitality studies is limited. However, Yurur, Koc, Taskin & Boz (2018) previously found that hotel employees in Turkey had an average intercultural sensitivity score of 3.61 (out of 5). In their study, women scored higher, as did those with previous international experiences such as working or studying abroad increased intercultural sensitivity.

Unsurprisingly several studies found that women scored higher on intercultural sensitivity, and studies on gender stereotypes often find traits such a friendliness, openness to feelings, and thoughtfulness belonging to women and assertiveness, confidence and openness to men (Costa et al., 2001). Women have been found to possess more developed soft skills than men and higher scores for social skills and emotional intelligence (Petrides and Furnham, 2000). While there is no inherent reason why men cannot be friendly and open, or women assertive and confident, it is assumed that gender might be a moderator in intercultural sensitivity within service encounters (Mattila, 2000). As such, this research note reports on a quantitative study that explored intercultural sensitivity among flight attendants, 204 flight attendants from a prominent airline in the Middle East were surveyed utilizing a questionnaire.

The sample was comprised of 157 women and 47 men from 59 countries. Much of the international hospitality industry is feminised, and airlines are no different, partly because women are thought to be more sensitive generally and, in this instance, towards other cultures

specifically. However, there is little empirical evidence to support this. At the risk of reifying gender stereotypes, this research, in the context of the sample, questions if women flight attendants are more interculturally sensitive than men flight attendants and provide recommendations for the training of men flight attendants. In addition to practical implications, this finding can call into question the gendering of men flight attendants, who challenge their gendered stereotypes and break the traditional patriarchal service hierarchy of women as servers and men as customers (Je, Khoo, & Yang, 2020).

Methodology

A questionnaire adopting Chen and Starosta's (2000) intercultural sensitivity scale was administered using Qualtrics XM via social media and email to flight attendants in the Middle East. Respondents that were employed as international flight attendants at the time of the survey were sought. Responses were collected between 20th August 2019 and 28th August 2019. The survey included several demographic questions, questions regarding the respondent's professional experience, and an intercultural sensitivity scale.

For this study, the intercultural sensitivity scale, originally developed by Chen and Starosta (1996), was adopted. It was adapted slightly to measure the intercultural sensitivity of international flight attendants. Therefore, originally worded items were adjusted for this context accordingly. For example, the wording of items such as "culturally-distinct counterpart" was replaced with "culturally diverse customer." Items included both positively and negatively worded statements (which were re-coded prior to analysis) to prevent biased responses (Adams, Khan, and Raeside, 2014). A principal component analysis of the 24 items was employed to explore if the same underlying dimensions emerge in this study with those extracted previously by Chen and Sarasota (2000). Indeed the five factors Interaction Engagement ($\alpha=.732$), Respect of Cultural Differences ($\alpha=.777$), Interaction Confidence($\alpha=.705$), Interaction Enjoyment ($\alpha=.776$), and Attentiveness ($\alpha=.715$) accounted

for 57.13% of the variance. Items loaded similarly across the five factors in the current study except for one item, "I often show my culturally-diverse customers my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues," which was loaded on the factor Attentiveness. Originally, this item loaded on the factor Interaction Engagement dimension is logical in this case, given the sample population (international flight attendants).

Given the results of the PCA, an aggregate variable for each dimension was calculated from individual items. As the purpose of this particular paper is to examine the differences in intercultural sensitivity between women flight attendants, and men flight attendants, a T-test was performed to test for mean differences across each of the intercultural sensitivity dimensions.

Profile of Respondents

A total of 286 responses were received, out of which there were 204 total valid responses. The sample consisted of 157 women and 47 men international flight attendants, with most respondents falling in the 28 – 34 age group (55.4 %) and an average length of employment of between 4 and 6 years. It is suggested that approximately 75% of flight attendants are women (Ferla & Graham, 2019), and as such, the gender breakdown of the sample is quite representative. Table 1 presents the profile of the sample; perhaps unsurprisingly, the respondents tended to be young (28 to 34 category n=113) women (n=157) of European nationality (n=95). Approximately half of the sampled flight attendants work in economy class, and this can be explained by the length of service, with the longer length of service leading to premium class or more senior positions.

Table 1. *Descriptive Analysis of Respondents' Demographic Profile*

Attributes		Frequency	Distribution
Age	21-27 years	57	27.9%
	28-34 years	113	55.4%
	35 or more	34	16.7%
Gender	Female	157	77%
	Male	47	23%
Nationality	European	95	46.6%
	Anglo-American	20	9.8%
	MENA	27	13.2%
	South Asian	10	4.9%
	East Asian	5	2.5%
	South American	16	7.8%
	African	13	6.4%
	South-east Asian	14	6.9%
Education	High School	72	35.3%
	University	132	64.7%
Working Experience	0-3 years	68	33.3%
	4-6 years	79	38.7%
	7-9 years	26	12.7%
	10 or more	31	15.2%
Job Role/ Position	Economy IFAs	100	49%

Premium Cabin IFAs		73	35.8%
Senior IFAs		31	15.2%

IFA= International Flight Attendant

Results

Prior research had highlighted the importance of international experiences in developing intercultural sensitivity (see, for example, Yurur et al., 2018). However, interestingly in a sample of flight attendants where intercultural sensitivity is a desirable trait, a high number (44%) had visited five countries or less prior to joining the international Airline (see table 2).

Table 2 *Descriptive Analysis of Respondents' Previous Experiences, Languages Spoken and Countries Visited*

Attributes		Frequency	Distribution
Previous Lived abroad in Another Country	Yes	133	65.2%
	No	71	34.8%
Previously Studied abroad in Another Country	Yes	71	34.8%
	No	132	64.7%
Working experience abroad	Yes	129	63.2%
	No	74	36.3%
Languages spoken	1	17	8.3%
	2	92	45.1%
	3	68	33.3%
	4 or more	27	13.2%
Countries visited	5 or fewer	90	44.1%
	6 -10	64	31.4%
	11-15	25	12.3%
	16 or more	25	12.3%

In order to explore the relationship between gender and intercultural sensitivity, an Independent T-test was conducted. According to the results (Table 3), women expressed more intercultural sensitivity in four out of five factors. There was a significant difference between the two groups for Respect for Cultural Differences (p= .008) and Attentiveness (p= .041). Women report to be more attentive (M 4.33) and more respectful towards the cultural differences (M 4.00). It appears that gender plays a significant role in the intercultural sensitivity of this sample.

Table 3. *Independent Sample's T-Test Multicultural Sensitivity Scale Dimensions by Gender*

	Women	Men		
	M (S.D)	M (S.D)	T-Score	Sig.
Interaction Engagement	4.03 (0.58)	3.85 (0.88)	-1.59	.114
Respect for Cultural Differences	4.33 (0.58)	4.01 (1.07)	-2.68	.008
Interaction Confidence	4.14 (0.54)	4.18 (0.90)	.37	.714
Interaction Enjoyment	4.37 (0.73)	4.23 (1.00)	-1.07	.285
Attentiveness	4.00 (0.79)	3.72 (1.00)	-2.05	.041

Conclusion and Discussion

This research note reports empirical evidence supporting the notion that women are more interculturally sensitive than men, although not our intention and perhaps runs the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes. When it comes to intercultural sensitivity in this sample of flight attendants, women outscore men on all factors except confidence. To some extent, the finding supports prior studies in hospitality (Yuror et al., 2018) and education (Tompkins, et al., 2017) and can be explained through a social constructionist understanding of gender (Butler, 1988). Yet, alongside other hospitality researchers, we would like to stress the inconsistency that poses, as while many women may be better suited to the hospitality industry, they face discrimination at the time of promotion (Yurur et al., 2018). While these results are the consequence of socialization and nothing to do with inherent differences

(Rippon, 2019), they can inform recruitment and training. Where intercultural sensitivity is important, it would appear most women will potentially be better suited to the position than most men, and if confidence is deemed a desirable trait, then training can be provided specifically for women.

Within our sample, it is also clear that men are not as interculturally sensitive as women (which supports prior studies: Mellizo, 2017; Moradi and Ghabanchi, 2019; Tompkins, et al., 2017; Yurur et al., 2018), and training could be tailored to them. Yet, we propose that training for both women and men flight attendants focuses on the day-to-day tasks and undoing gender (Kelan, 2018); that way, women could become more confident and men more sensitive, even if these traits contradict their gender roles. In doing so, organisations will challenge patriarchal norms (Gebbels, Gao, and Cai, 2020) while simultaneously ensuring the customers' needs are met.

Tourism and hospitality are gendered industries, and it is not surprising that the sample was comprised of a majority of women respondents, but what this should suggest is that without women, the international service encounter would be very different indeed. Intercultural sensitivity is perhaps a skill traditionally thought of as female and, as such, something that is not valued in society (Cole, 2018; Enloe, 2000; Jeffrey, Riccio, and Paris, 2018). We would like to take this platform to suggest that feminine traits and characteristics should be something to value and reward regardless of the body that shows them. The sample was taken from flight attendants whom we would expect to be interculturally sensitive and who have received some training – there may be more considerable differences between women and men working outside of the aviation industry. Future research could explore the gendered nature of intercultural sensitivity in other areas of hospitality and tourism.

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