

Flight Attendant Uniform: Fitting the Fleet

Background: As of May 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Labor estimated that there were 96,900 flight attendants working in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Each flight attendant is expected to wear a uniform representing their employer and presenting a manner of poise, kindness, strength, and service with a smile (American Airlines, 2021; Barry, 2007; Lin, 2015; Sangster & Smith, 2016). From mid-flight births to onboard deaths, flight attendants are trained to address all potential emergencies while on duty. Demonstrated proficiency in emergency landings, turbulence injuries, firefighting, cabin depressurization, in-flight medical situations, smoke in the cabin, hazardous spills, hijackings, land and water evacuations, disruptive passengers, and flight deck protection while serving customer's needs makes for a complex combination of job duties (Federal Aviation Administration, n.d.). With flight attendants having one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses of all occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), it is pertinent to explore the relationship of their uniform with the physical duties required. While there has been much written regarding the constructed image portrayed through flight attendant uniforms (Adomaitis & Johnson, 2005; Haise & Rucker, 2003; Santos, et al., 2010), little research has been done to determine if these uniforms are suited to the physical movements flight attendants must perform. To address this issue, the following research question was asked: Do uniforms function properly for flight attendants' routine and emergency duties?

Method: DeJonge's (1984) functional clothing design process uses a multi-pronged approach including user interviews and feedback when designing apparel and provided the framework in which to understand flight attendant uniforms as functional garments. In this study, one focus group consisting of nine participants and 17 individual interviews were conducted. Participants were asked open-ended questions designed to gain insight into flight attendants' perceptions regarding the fit, sizing, and functionality of their uniform when performing routine on-the-job tasks. The 26 participants' data were analyzed using thematic analysis to find critical factors affecting the functionality of flight attendants' uniforms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Axial coding continued the process with the goal of organizing these codes and linking them to represent the core concepts of the study. During axial coding, more analytical concepts were revealed to the investigator. This qualitative collective case study explored the relationship between flight attendants' uniforms and duties performed. In using such research methods for this study, a rich understanding of the fit, sizing, and function of flight attendants' uniforms was gleaned.

Results and Discussion: Flight attendants adjust their uniforms through physical changes and/or mental adaptations for them to function during routine and emergency duties. This central theme of the study is supported through themes found by coding the raw data with functional fit and sizing, and functional flaws being two themes which were prominent.

Functional Fit and Sizing: Participants spoke of a wide assortment of physical movements took place while performing their job including reaching, bending, squatting, pushing/pulling, climbing, and even completing job duties while physically lying on the floor. The functional fit of the uniform restricted participants' movements resulting in modesty issues,

tightness at the shoulder area, and untucked shirts. Finding the right size of uniform has presented many issues for flight attendants. Inconsistent sizing from the manufacturer has led some flight attendants to make their own uniform adjustments. Such sizing adjustments included one or more of the following: pinning, sizing up or down, tailoring, or ordering uniforms from the tall category.

Functional flaws: The second theme of functional flaws encompassed undesired experiences for flight attendants concerning their uniforms while completing their job duties. To understand the issues in the current flight attendant uniform, this theme encompassed functional design elements that were not meeting their intended objectives. Functional flaws were found in the uniform's coat (male and female collections), dress snap (female collection), belt (male and female collections), apron (unisex), gripping rubber (female collection), and waistband elastic (female collection). When functional flaws were present in the uniform, participants in this study responded by making physical adjustments to include changing and repairing hardware, wearing garments from outside companies, choosing to wear components from previous uniforms, and ceasing wearing the uniform component altogether. Functional flaws caused undesired experiences for flight attendants that included embarrassment, stress, annoyance, lack of professionalism, and physical discomfort. Flight attendants have found creative solutions to the functional problems of their uniform.

The adjustments participants made for their uniforms to function during routine and emergency duties encompassed physical changes and/or mental adaptations. An example of a physical adjustment is re-tucking shirt tails during work duties. Numerous participants made mental adaptations by letting go of their expectations of fit and function to complete routine and emergency duties. Participants in this study recognized the power of their image and often prioritized it over their own comfort. The distress caused by the uniform's propensity to fade and come untucked seemed to outweigh the physical pain caused by its inability to provide functional movement. Image prioritization is further shown when many participants told of colleagues tailoring their uniforms to achieve a desired silhouette. There appears to be a disconnect between the perception of functionally fit garments and the conditioned mentality to power through duties, especially in emergency situations. Participants in this study believe they have no power to make substantial changes to the comfort/functionality/mobility of their uniforms; therefore a "just deal with it" attitude has prevailed.

Conclusion: Flight attendants are expected to perform customer service duties, maintain a professional image and address all potential emergencies while on duty. This study was unique in that it sought to understand the flight attendant's perspective of uniform fit and functionality as it related to these duties. The findings from this study show that flight attendants will complete their required tasks during routine and emergency duties regardless of muscle pain, modesty issues, inconsistent sizing systems, thermal discomfort, embarrassment, or even compliance to the airline's image standards. The results of this study are beneficial for other occupations required to wear uniforms as well as employers requiring dress codes. This study provided insight into the overlooked area of fit and function of flight attendant garments and can provide a foundation on which future studies can be built. Flight attendants' physical needs while completing job duties should be examined further.

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