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Take-off, turbulence and turnaround

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to explore the evolving nature of the work of cabin crew in a Scandinavian carrier in three eras, drawing on theories of gender and emotional labour.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on ethnographic data from fieldwork, interviews and documents.

Findings – From being a feminized and temporary occupation for young, upper- and middle-class women in the 1970s, the occupation became a full-time job and with greater diversity of cabin crew. Today there are signs of the job becoming a precarious and temporary one of demanding and devalorized work in a polarized and class-divided labour market. Changing circumstances impact on the emotional labour requirement and terms and conditions at work.

Research limitations/implications – A limitation is that the research design was not initially longitudinal in the sense that the author does not have exactly the same kind of data from each era. The author has, however, been involved in this field for two decades, used multiple methods and interacted with different stakeholders and drew on a unique data material.

Practical implications – The development in aviation is contributing to new discriminatory practices, driving employee conditions downwards and changing the job demands. This development will have practical consequences for the lives and families of cabin crew.

Social implications – The analysis illustrates how work ‘constructs’ workers and contributes in creating jobs that are not sustainable for the employees. Intensification of work, insecurity and tougher working conditions also challenge key features in the Nordic model such as proper pay, decent work and a life-long employment. Much indicates that the profession is again becoming a temporary one of demanding work with poor working conditions in a polarized and class-divided labour market.

Originality/value – The research contributes to the literature on emotional labour, gender and the evolving nature of the work of cabin crew. The unique data material, the longitudinal aspect of the research and the focus on a single network carrier are good in charting changes over time.

Keywords Changes in Scandinavian aviation, Cabin crew, Emotional labour, Gender, Intensification, Devalorization

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the evolving nature of the work of cabin crew in its historical, structural and cultural context to shed light on what is at stake in a globalized industry, and how the profession is under attack. The paper draws on two commissioned, action-oriented projects carried out in the Scandinavian airline industry in 2000–2003 (Amble *et al.*, 2003; Forseth, 2003), and a follow-up in 2019–2020. In the early days, airlines hired young, single, upper- and middle-class females who were proficient in languages and wanted to see the world before getting married, to take care of safety on board, and make passengers feel comfortable in-flight. In addition, the job required the physical labour of serving drinks and food, and the mental labour of preventing and coping calmly with irregularities and emergencies. In a study of Delta Airline flight attendants, Hochschild (1983, p. 7) coined the term *emotional labo*ur to denote the effort to suppress or manage feelings to create "a publicly observable facial and bodily display" that reflects the company image, to promote customer satisfaction in contrast to *emotional work* performed in private life. The concept of *aesthetic labour* was later coined to bring bodies centre stage, defined as "mobilisation, development, and commodification of embodied dispositions" (Witz *et al.*, 2003, p. 37). There is an extensive literature on emotional and aesthetic labour and its application in the airline industry (e.g. Ren, 2017; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Forseth, 2005a; Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Peterson, 2003; Williams, 2003; Whiteleg, 2002), but few studies from a histographic perspective (Weigand *et al.*, 2017; Baum, 2012; Mills, 1998).

Aviation was one of the most regulated industries until the 1970s, airlines being required to comply with national, bilateral and international regulations (Doganis, 2009). Employees in aviation had, through regulation and widespread state ownership, good working conditions and high levels of job security. Airline industry deregulation began in the 1970s in the US and the 1980s in Europe and led to increased competition and cheaper tickets. In the 1990s, European Union policy further contributed to "open skies" agreements and full deregulation in 1997 (Boyd and Bain, 1998). The cumulative effect of this was a reduction in the influence of national authorities on routes, capacity and pricing. Introduction of new business models led to increased competition and cheaper tickets (Wallace *et al.*, 2006). Major network companies, despite forming alliances or merging to strengthen their competitive edge, lost many passengers to the low-cost carriers. Cheap flights satisfied new passenger groups and air travel became a means of transport for all walks of life (Grant, 2017) now comparable to travelling by train or bus. The recent decades have been an era of turnaround as air carriers are cutting costs to survive in the fierce competition (O'Connell and Williams, 2005), work intensification, and diminishing terms and conditions of employment (Jorens *et al.*, 2015; Curley and Royle, 2013). The situation is further aggravated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) subsequent shutdown in 2020 and the dramatic fall in travel habits and tourism.

This study contributes to the literature on gender and emotional labour and the impact of historical, structural and cultural contexts on job demands and working conditions. Besides, the longitudinal nature of the research and the focus on a single, Scandinavian carrier is good in charting changes over time. The topic is particularly interesting to study in a Scandinavian context because the development in the industry is threatening key features of the "Nordic model" such as equality, decent pay, permanent job as a norm, a high level of unionization, and institutionalized collaboration between unions and management (Bungum *et al.*, 2015; Dølvik *et al.*, 2015). The article begins by introducing the theoretical framework and previous research. Subsequently, the research design, the data material and the case are presented. The analysis brings forth how changing circumstances impact on the requirement and amount of emotional labour, and the extent to which the profession is under attack.

Theoretical framework and previous research

Gender division and gendering of work

Aviation is a gender-divided and gendered industry in which women and men have held different positions and in which ideas about masculinity and femininity have been linked to different types and spatial arrangements of work (Baum, 2012; Barry, 2007). Gendered notions of work and qualifications are also related to historical, cultural and local conditions. Mills' (1998) historical study of British Airways illustrates this very well. He discussed four types of masculinities: these were "the pilot", "the steward", "the mechanic" and "the native boy". He argued that these representations contributed to the exclusion of women and "people of color" by establishing cultural rules for the typical characteristics and requirements of the different professions and their workspaces. The metaphor cockpit, originally an arena for cock fights, is illustrative. The cabin was, in contrast, a feminine domain, but with two exceptions – the steward (the male chef) and the purser (the manager of the cabin crew). Air carriers initially only hired young, single, upper- and middle-class females who were proficient in languages, portrayed as icons of charm, beauty and care (Baum, 2012; Walker, 2009; Barry, 2007). The notion of the stereotypical inherent qualities of women made them particularly suited for the job as flight attendants.

Production of sexual difference and exploitation of female aesthetics are aspects of employment in aviation (Taylor and Tyler, 2000). An advertisement for Thai Airlines from the 1970s depicted three flight attendants and the text: "The only wide bodies we have in service are our DC10's" (Forseth, 2005b). The ad plays on the concept of wide body (a broad-bodied jetliner also known as a twin-aisle aircraft, often with a hull diameter of 5–6 meters) in contrast to the flight attendants who were described as being "slight of stature, graceful of move and friendly of nature". Such advertisements affect people's expectations and their understandings of the qualifications and nature of the profession. Pakistan Airlines in 2019 sent a letter to their flight attendants stating that they would have to lose weight if they exceeded the weight requirement or they would risk being grounded, according to the company's spokesman because "no one wants fat flight attendants on board the plane" (Graff, 2019). Although Western carriers have altered criteria and flagged up flight attendants as "safety experts" (Williams, 2003), gendered representations linger. In 2001, the designer of the new British Airways uniforms wanted to reintroduce glamour to the industry: "The girls (sic) will look very sexy and the men will look like strong heroes" (sic) (Clement, 2001). Female flight attendants were infantilized, whereas their colleagues were presented as "strong heroes". After criticism from trade unions and politicians, Norwegian Air Shuttle dropped a controversial policy that required female cabin crew to wear heels at all times when outside the aircraft cabin and ended a mandatory make-up policy for female crew members (Adams and Whitehead, 2019). Paradoxically, some (Eastern) low cost companies seek to reduce costs while also exploiting aesthetic and sexualized qualities of female flight attendants in order to improve service standards and reinforce competitive advantage (Ren, 2017; Spiess and Waring, 2005). These differences between air carriers are due to legislation (absence of anti-discrimination laws), national regulations, labour market practices, cultural differences and management practices.

Emotional labour

In a study of Delta Airline flight attendants, Hochschild (1983) brought an undervalued, gendered dimension of service work to centre stage. Emotional labour was defined as being the effort to suppress or manage feelings to create "a publicly observable facial and bodily display" that reflects the company image, to promote customer satisfaction (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). A main point was that management exerts some control over the emotional activities of employees through training, follow-up and prescribed "feeling rules". Hochschild postulated that smiling over a longer time to satisfy a corporate image could lead to emotional dissonance (Hochschild, 1983, p. 90), alienation from a part of the self, even burnout (p. 7). Women, due to their historical inferiority in society and weaker "status shields", were prone to more verbal outbreaks and harassment from clients than men (Hochschild, 1983, p. 163). Emotional labour thus places different demands on women and men, and they therefore experience it differently (Forseth, 2005a).

Some scholars (Bolton, 2005; Bolton and Boyd, 2003) refer to cabin crews as "emotional managers", synthesizing, and juggling the demands of managers and customers, and employing a repertoire of emotional displays, coping strategies and performances (Amble and Gjerberg, 2003; Peterson, 2003). Wouters (1989) underscored that emotional labour in cabin crew can be satisfying as well as distressing. Curley and Royle (2013) found that long-serving cabin crew in Irish Aer Lingus saw reduction in emotional labour requirement, work intensification and more emphasis on sales as an attack on their professionalism and a degradation of work. Room for improvisation and autonomy are important when dealing with disruptive passenger behaviour (Amble and Gjerberg, 2003; Forseth, 2005b), "air rage" and violence (McLinton *et al.*, 2020; Boyd, 2002). The increase of air rage is also related to more traffic and delays.

Following the theoretical framework, the paper outlines the importance of history and context in constituting cabin crew and the requirement for emotional and aesthetic labour. To draw demarcations between different eras is challenging because change happens gradually. Mills (2010) used the notion of junctures for specific timeframes, which address certain periods of time that are influenced by various world views and factors but impact on how work is understood during those junctures. I teased out three eras, employing terms from the industry: "take-off" in the 1960s/1970s, "turbulence" around 2000, and recent "turnaround", to structure the analysis.

Methodology

The ambition is to study the evolving nature of cabin work over time in light of changing circumstances in the aviation industry. The paper draws on two commissioned, action-oriented research projects on frontline work in aviation (Amble *et al.*, 2003; Forseth, 2003) and a follow-up in 2019, none of the studies were funded by the four air carriers. Here I limit the analysis to one of the companies, Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), and the data stem from three data sets: extensive fieldwork, qualitative interviews and documentary material. The research is influenced by narrative research methods (Riessman, 2008) and memory work (Haug, 1987), in this case, retelling/writing down stories from encounters with passengers.

Based at Oslo Airport Gardermoen for a three-year period from 2000, I was given the use of an office and could move freely throughout the areas designated for employees using the identity card I was issued. I learnt a new "language" including PAX for passenger, UM for Unaccompanied Minor, and IRR for irregularities (deviance from scheduled arrival/departure, delays due to bad weather, technical conditions or late arrival of staff). Together with another research colleague I attended an in-house course for handling "Unruly Passengers". I also travelled on stand-by air tickets for crew, sometimes seated next to cabin crew, and once in the cockpit.

The level of unionization is high and due to its origin, the case company has many trade unions. I, through a dialogue with union representatives of the Scandinavian Cabin Crew Association, became a subscriber to their trade union member magazine *iforum*. It became an important source of knowledge about the nature of cabin work past and present from the viewpoints of the trade union members, contested issues among members and between union and management. In addition, I interviewed managers (operational, middle and strategic), union representatives, cabin crew, and ground personnel individually and in focus groups, alone and with colleagues (Tables 1 and 2). A purposive-cum-convenience sample was recruited, the participants being selected based on profession, gender, age, seniority and availability. The standard safeguards of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent were preserved, and the interviews lasted for 1.5–3 h.

The most extensive data material stems from the initial project period including retrospective data. I have as a frequent flyer continued observation during flights throughout the years. In a follow-up in 2019–2020, I collected more public documents, online issues of the trade union magazine and conducted interviews with a purser and two former flight attendants who had been working in the 70s, 80s and 90s. I cite the names as given in published papers but preserve the anonymity of participants by using pseudonyms, titles and year of the interview.

The analysis was iterative and inspired by abduction alternating between theoretical interpretation and empirical analysis based on anomalous or unexpected findings (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). The encounter with the field resulted in images of cabin crew and ground personnel as service professionals. Employees distanced themselves from

Table 1.
Overview of the data sets

Data source, era	Site, personnel	Time	Data material
Takeoff era			
Documents	Union magazine, podcast	1950-	Notes
Interviews	Memory work of flight attendants	1970s	Transcripts, notes
Turbulence era			
Fieldwork: (participant) observation	Check-in, lounge, departure, arrival, service- and traffic office, cabin, cockpit, chats, meetings, seminars	2000-	Fieldnotes
Individual and focus group interviews	Ground personnel, cabin crew, management, shop stewards, HSE personnel, safety reps ($N = 41$)	2000–2002	Field notes, transcripts
Unruly passengers	In-house with cabin crew ($N = 11$)	2002	Field notes
Organizing kick-offs, seminars	Ground personnel staff	2001	Written narratives on encounters with pax ($N = 175$)
Trade union magazine (iforum)	The Scandinavian Cabin Crew Association	2000-	Text, quotes, notes
Turnaround era			
Follow-up interviews	Female flight attendants ($N = 3$)	2019–20	Transcripts, notes
Trade union magazine, documents	Sasgroup.com	2014-	Notes
Observation	Aircrafts	2000-	Notes

Table 2.
Interviews with flight attendants

Pseudonym	Position	Age group	Year
Emma	Flight attendant	30+	2000
Julie	Flight attendant	40+	2000
Ada	Flight attendant	30+	2000
Anne	Former flight attendant	70+	2019
Berit	Former purser	50+	2020
Helene	Senior purser	40+	2020

feminized and sexualized stereotypes, conveyed the joy of interacting with passengers, and the impact of irregularities or abnormal situations on their workday. A purposive selection of excerpts on work content, qualifications and encounters with passengers was inserted in tables and coded using empirical codes.

The strength of the data material is the longitudinal nature of the research and the focus on a single air carrier. There is a challenge reading old documents and interpreting former transcripts. One way of merging understandings with the past and present time is critical hermeneutics, an example is the research by Prasad and Mir (2002, p. 97). This is an interpretive methodology where a text is analysed concerning the social, cultural, historical, and in this case, the industrial context in which the text was produced. I have read various texts such as minutes, internal documents, published histories, narratives, watched films and listened to podcasts. A limitation is that the research design was not initially longitudinal in the sense that I do not have exactly the same kind of data from each era. I have, however, been involved in this field for two decades, used multiple methods and interacted with different stakeholders, and drew on a unique data material.

A brief history

Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) was established in 1946 as the flag carrier of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and was the first airline to operate a trans-polar route between Copenhagen and Los Angeles (Sasgroup, n.d.a). In the 1980s, SAS had succeeded in cultivating the image of being the businessman's airline, cabin crew being required to complete smiling training courses and provide the ultimate service experience (Carlzon, 1989). The air carrier capitalized on its Scandinavian roots of quality, design and simplicity in the branding (Brûlé, 1998). With its strong pan-Scandinavian profile, a mixture of crew from the Scandinavian countries on flights were the norm until the parent company was divided into Swedish, Danish and Norwegian subsidiaries in 1996. The Norwegian state sold out its share of stocks in the air carrier in 2018. Following the success of low-cost carriers, SAS fell into financial difficulties resulting in several rounds with cost-cutting measures and threats of bankruptcy.

Take-off: glamour and the iconic stewardess

The flight attendant was an icon of charm and beauty, and a dream come true for many young girls as described in documentary material and memory work by former flight attendants. Some of the "stewardesses" in SAS were after the Second World War safety professionals with military experience and later many nurses and service employees were employed. In the 1950s, the airline recruited young, unmarried women from the upper or middle classes who had attended home economics schools, who were proficient in several languages and wanted to travel before getting married. They had to stand between 160 and 175 cm tall and the weight requirement was around 58 kg (Sasgroup, n.d.b, podcast). Two cabin occupations were reserved for men: the steward (a trained chef) and the cabin manager or purser (a senior flight attendant). This illustrates how work was gender divided and gendered. From the outside it was a glamorous job: They were well paid when compared to the average salary of other female professions at that time, and had access to cheap airline tickets and travel. A subsistence allowance and exotic accommodation at long stops abroad were in addition to the basic salary, which helped strengthen the status compared to other service jobs.

Flights were associated with first-class service and glamour – a luxury reserved for high society and the passengers were dressed up. "Smiling to the passengers was a matter of course", said Anne (former flight attendant, interview 2019) illustrating the "shadow work" of managing emotions in interactions with passengers. This resonates with how flight attendants at the Delta Airlines' Training Centre were told that the smile was their greatest asset because their professional smile represented the company's intention of a punctual, safe and comfortable flight (p. 4). The flight attendants, predominantly young women, were encouraged to look at the cabin as their home (Hochschild, 1983, p. 90) and treat passengers as guests, while at the same time keeping safety details in mind. They were expected to be an (air) hostess taking care of and responding to the needs of the passengers. Many flight attendants spoke of enjoying "working with people" and adopted the living room analogy as an aid to being friendly (p. 107). This is a striking example of how women entering working life in the 1960s and 1970s were expected to keep the place neat and tidy as women did at home and to be a hostess serving and waiting on men through token prestations. This also illustrates how occupational roles and gender roles merged.

The requirements and training to become a flight attendant and "get your wing" [the company wing is a symbol of graduation] at the SAS Air Hostess College in the late 60s included theoretical and practical training and lasted six months. Former flight attendant Anne (interview 2019) described the comprehensive course: It included geography, disease theory, safety (procedures for evacuation, emergency landing, fire, turning lifeboats in the sea, and first aid), make-up courses, wine and spirits etiquette, wine tasting at the Norwegian State Liquor Monopoly, and how to prepare and serve delicious dishes such as how to cook a tenderloin. Gourmet food was served in first class on porcelain dishes with excellent wines in crystal glasses. The flight attendants had to speak the standard national language without any dialect, the uniforms were designed by French fashion houses, and SAS had detailed regulations for flight attendant height, weight, use of make-up and jewellery, hair length (to the collar or wear up), skirts and heels in the cabin (minimum 2 cm) and outside the cabin (5 cm). This illustrates how looks and aesthetics were cultivated and prescribed based on certain images of femininity.

According to Hochschild, sexuality was another aspect embedded in this work: "The company wants to sexualize the cabin atmosphere (sic) [. . .] they figure mild sexual arousal will be helpful in getting people's mind off flying." (Hochschild, 1983, p. 94). Air passengers at that time were mainly men, and flight attendants became an object of gaze and desire. They were expected to "play the game [of flirting] especially with the "sport" "who wants a Playboy Club atmosphere" (Hochschild, 1983, footnote p. 94). In our interviews, there were examples of stewardesses being treated as sexual objects:

> Two drunk Norwegian passengers on an international flight to Norway, who had been denied boarding by another airline, sat on each side of the aisle. As I moved the trolley down the aisle, they suddenly grabbed me tight, one saying: let's take off her panties! I was taken by surprise and instinctively hit one on the head with a bottle and rushed into the cockpit to inform the captain because I was afraid I had hurt the passenger. (Anne, former flight attendant, interview 2019)

Airlines rules clearly state that drunk passengers are not permitted to board because they pose a security risk if an emergency occurs. In this case, however, colleagues earlier in the production chain had forwarded the "problem" by not denying boarding. Alcohol is an ingredient in many of the stories about disruptive passengers' behaviour. In this case, the flight attendant reacted by setting a physical boundary using a bottle.

The job as flight attendant was a temporary job for young women. In 1951, a local newspaper in Norway published the following message:

> SAS states that 52 Norwegian women are currently working as flight attendants. One problem, however, is that these ladies are so popular in the marriage market that they remain only a couple of years (*Iforum*, 1/2002, p. 17).

The profession was still, in the 1970s, considered to be a temporary job:

> In 1977, few of us on the flight attendant's course thought we would fly anything more than a couple of years before we got a proper job, but most are still in the company' (Editor Unn Busk, *Iforum*, 5/2002, p. 19).

The flight attendants referred to the profession as temporary and anything but a proper job, but also so attractive that many continued also after getting married.

Turbulence: professionalization and fight against stereotypes

The era around the millennium can be characterized in terms of a greater diversity of female and male cabin crew, age groups, and bodies also representing the diversity of passengers. More men had started working as cabin crew and mothers returned after childbirth. This reflects gender equality, the Nordic dual-earner/dual-career model, and a welfare regime with long parental leave schemes (Bungum *et al.*, 2015). Cultivation of the safety professional and the fight against (sexualized) stereotypes were important topics in the interviews and the union magazine. John, working as ground personnel (interview 2001) described the discrepancy between what people think: "that we are somewhat small-brained", and the knowledge, competence and people skills required in interacting with passengers. He verbalized a hierarchy with ground personnel at the bottom as many believe that "we failed to reach the sky" [become flight attendants], "the flight attendant next to the pilot" and "the pilot next to God". The struggle for respect and the value of qualifications were recurrent themes in the union magazine:

> In short, our main task is to be professional safety representatives on board. We should be able to extinguish a fire, handle unruly passengers, do decompression, look for bombs, and be ready to evacuate. This is when we can show what our job onboard is really about and how well trained we are. Unfortunately, we still see in the media that we are portrayed as an air waiter, 'trolley dolly' and other 'coffee, tea or me'- varieties. I would like the passengers to know that we are not just decoration and coffee servers, but safety professionals. (Air hostess Inger-Helen Enger, *iforum,* 5/2001:35) [original underlining]

The professional aspects are here brought to centre stage, the flight attendant encouraging colleagues to be very conscious of these aspects in contrast to the gendered, and sexualized metaphors "trolley dolly" and "coffee, tea or me" (Walker, 2009). Flight attendants distanced themselves from such feminized images describing SAS as not the most elegant or luxurious of airlines but offering individual, informal and personal service with a Scandinavian touch. Berit and Helene (interviews 2020) talked about themselves and their colleagues as "milkmaids" and "mountain goats" used to work hard under harsh conditions including shift work, irregular hours, disruption of circadian rhythms, few breaks and no break room, unilateral movements, poor air quality and the risk of being affected by diseases. Boyd and Bain (1998) have previously pointed out that such aspects have received relatively little attention.

Awareness of safety was sharpened following the 9/11 terrorist attack. Many of the cabin crew's safety duties such as checking first aid and safety equipment and organizing an evacuation are, however, hidden from the gaze of passengers or become visible only if a critical situation occurs. The safety demonstration in the cabin on departure and serving coffee and tea (complementary at SAS) are what the passengers see.

Both female and male flight attendants emphasized that interaction with passengers was mostly stimulating and enjoyable. Some regarded irregularities or abnormal situations as challenges in their everyday workday. Such situations represented ambivalence: satisfaction if an appropriate response could "turn a grumpy passenger", and dissatisfaction if they fell short. Flight attendant Julie (interview 2020) said that with experience they learnt how to take control using LEAP: listen, empathy, accept and present solutions. At the course for handling unruly passengers, we were taught verbal techniques and the importance of open bodily postures, which can be used to avoid the escalation of a situation. We were trained in the use of plastic handcuffs as a final solution, where a passenger became a safety risk. The uniform is a marker of rank and can be important in dealing with disruptive passengers. Some flight attendants talked about the branding of their new uniforms to an “informal and everyday like” Scandinavian style to make passengers feel more relaxed and comfortable. Female flight attendants could choose between trousers, skirt, dresses, tops, shirts, jackets, wests, turtlenecks and different colours. The outcome was a crew with different outfits and more gender-neutral and “casual” uniforms. Participants shared their stories from incidents with unruly passengers. Robert, a funny flight attendant, was scolded after a delay by a celebrity from TV seated in 3c. After listening to verbal abuse about “SAS being a shitty company”, the flight attendant took off his uniform jacket, bowed, and presented himself with his name and the following phrase: At your disposal! This was his way of taking control of the situation with humour, whereas the celebrity “lost his face” as fellow-passenger started laughing. On her first long haul flight, Eva was taken by surprise when a male passenger grabbed her boob and she reacted instinctively and hit him. She added that with more experience she probably would have reacted verbally, but underscored that “passengers treated young flight attendants with pearl earrings differently than a male bulldog”. By drawing on physical attributes, she created a gender dichotomy. Ada enjoyed flirting with *all* passengers, and Emma said that she would like to have more flirting on board (interviews 2020). Here they were talking about enjoyable encounters and not sexual banter.

> The quality of the crew rises when men enter. Men have authority and the passengers do not conduct any sexual banter with men. Male flight attendants, moreover, bring a lot of humour. Men possess positional power by their gender. (Ada, flight attendant, interview 2001)

This quote contains several generalizations: male flight attendants make a positive contribution to the work environment, bring humour into the workplace, are endowed with more positional power, have a stronger buffer and so are not as exposed to the sexual attention of passengers. Ada continued talking about how male flight attendants were stereotyped as being gay, although there were also heterosexual men among cabin crew. This underscores existing gender discourses, categorizing and stigmatizing people by “lumping them together” in narrow categories. She went on, however, to describe her gay colleagues as “open-minded, well-groomed with a smart uniform and attracted to the lifestyle of travelling, and how they became their “girlfriends”. This was carried even further when some interviewees referred to gay flight attendants as being “exceptionally service minded”. Male flight attendants were, therefore, feminized and even hyper-feminized, in contrast to the captains who were carriers of more traditional forms of masculinities.

Dark clouds were appearing, and in 2003, a manager on a strategic level summarized the challenges facing the air carrier in three words: critical, dramatic and demanding. On the one hand, it was due to changes in external conditions and extreme incidents such as the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in 2002–2004. On the other hand, the difficulty in keeping a competitive edge given their history as a network company with a pan-Scandinavian infrastructure and cost base, and many trade unions fighting for working conditions and employee benefits. Trade unions can attempt to push back on some trends and go on strike (Taylor and Moore, 2015), and there have been several strikes in SAS.

Turnaround: devalorization, intensification and precarization

A flight attendant described how recent changes in the industry impacted their workplace:

> Much has happened in recent years in our industry. The competition is tougher than ever, and the pressure on our workplaces is great. Demands for higher earnings, better productivity and lower costs mean that many of our competitors employ foreign crews and establish bases outside Norway. With such different competitive conditions, it is becoming increasingly difficult to compete in a good way. (Flight attendant Paal Ole Sand, *iforum* 2/2014: 28)

This flight attendant emphasized that low-cost airlines with "no frills" have outsourced functions or employ foreign crew and how SAS is under heavy pressure. The CEO in 2017 stated that "we are going to be champions in Europe on hiring" (The newspaper Dagens Næringsliv 08.09.2016 cited in Eldring and Ørjasæter, 2018). To conserve a competitive edge, SAS is copying some of the strategies of low-cost competitors such as Norwegian Air Shuttle. When SAS was at the brink of bankruptcy in 2012, the trade unions finally approved a deal with management: increase in working hours, cut in salaries between 12 and 20%, reduction in pension schemes and retirement plans, and other employee benefits. At the time of my interviews during lockdown, the trade unions were unwilling to settle for a similar deal. Purser Helene (interview 2020), described how the number of legs per day had increased from an average of four to six or even seven. Cabin crew normally work 47 h a week, but this can become 60 h if there is a delay. She explained about other changes: newly recruited SAS crew were employed on temporary part-time 70/90 contracts (winter/summer seasons) and the pay was lower. Another group, the on-call workers never knew when they were going to fly, and the pay was so low that one of them had said she "could not afford to call in sick because it would mean no work, no pay". SAS has offered packages to senior crew members, the more senior they are the better the packages. "We have become too expensive and are just a number", concluded the purser. The length of training has been reduced to 5–6 weeks and is mostly on first aid and safety. "Service has to be learnt onboard on-the-job", said this purser. As cabin manager the purser plays an important part in cultivating professional crew teams, transmitting knowledge about service concepts, interaction with passengers and more tacit dimensions of the job. These changes, taken together, have contributed to a devalorization of the work.

All our interviewees said that an uplifting part of the job is the interaction with passengers but that there is less time to interact with passengers. Cabin crew is, at the same time, often the only staff who meets passengers face-to-face. Purser Helene took pride in making the most out of the micro-interactions with passengers at boarding time or during flight. The behaviour of some passengers, however, could be challenging:

> A business passenger, one of those who doesn't bother to greet us when boarding, stopped me while seated and shouted 'POWER!' pointing at his cell phone. When I later came by with the trolley he took up his phone and pointed to the screen where he had written seven items he wanted (for free). Really? I replied. He added that when he ordered more than four items, the cabin crew forgot after the fourth. Are you really going to eat all that? - I couldn't help replying. He confirmed it and added: he was gluten intolerant and could not eat those 'lefse' rolls we were serving. (Helene, purser, interview 2019)

The company policy is not to question orders from business passengers, but the purser verbalized her reactions to his disrespectful behaviour and comments. "We are the frontline and we get all the questions and the criticism", said another flight attendant (Lindi S. Aurmark, *iforum* 2/2002:6). Articles in the union magazine and research point to a change of behaviour and less respect for cabin crew (Williams, 2003; Whiteleg, 2002) and an increase in passenger "air rage" (McLinton *et al.*, 2020). Lower staffing levels per passenger and increased work intensity, therefore, mean that boundary regulation and control have become important dimensions in the emotional labour towards passengers. The bodies of the employees, the uniform, and authority become part of boundary setting, this being reflected in the need for new cultural constructions of bodies.

Crew, shop stewards, and management agree that "the glamour and the days of adventures are long gone" (*iforum*, 2/2003, p. 3). Unni Busk, the editor of the union magazine, predicted that cabin work would become a low-status occupation due to the development in aviation: "it will become a part-time job while studying, or a stopgap job for a couple of years between jobs and cabin crew requirements will become less and less". The low-cost companies want high employee rotation to lower labour costs, wrote the editor, this being a further interpretation of the term “not a proper job”, cabin crew not being seen as a serious, life-long work. Cabin crew and emotional labour requirements might still be a valued asset on a discursive level. However, crew members are in practice seen as being a cost, and intensified workload reduces the time available to perform emotional labour.

Discussion

Civil aviation operates in one of the most global of markets and displays features of late capitalism that include market deregulation, in which technological and economic forces are important drivers in a race towards the bottom. Demands for efficiency improvements, cheaper tickets and new organizational models with outsourcing, drive employee conditions downwards in the battle for customers (Jorens *et al.*, 2015; Hagesæther, 2014; Curley and Royle, 2013). We all want cheap tickets, and we all therefore contribute. Precarization is a process that has been going on for some time in the industry with declining professional standing and more insecure employment even for pilots (Maxwell and Grant, 2021). Employees have been under attack with consequences for terms and conditions and work organization (Taylor and Moore, 2015; Moore and Taylor, 2021; Curley and Royle, 2013; Wallace *et al.*, 2006; Whiteleg, 2003). I have analysed how flight attendants have experienced changes in the nature and requirement of emotional labour and working conditions in a Scandinavian context over the past 50 years. My starting point was theories of gender and emotional labour. Hochschild (1983) suggested that emotional labour was related to how competition in the market developed. Technological developments, deregulation and the entry of low-cost carriers into the market have meant that air travel has become a transport service that is comparable with trains and buses. Passengers come from all walks of life and they are more demanding (Forseth, 2021; Williams, 2003; Whiteleg, 2002). Increased traffic and delays have also contributed to more disruptive passenger behaviour and “air rage” (McLinton *et al.*, 2020). Lower staffing levels per passenger, and increased work intensity have meant that boundary regulation and control have become important dimensions of emotional labour. Employees individually experience cross-pressure from societal developments, management requirements and customer demands. They become responsible for matters far beyond their area of authority and responsibility, and must set boundaries themselves. The bodies of the employees become part of this boundary setting during encounters with passengers (Forseth, 2005a).

The profession is gender-segregated, and gendering of work is still a characteristic but the analysis illustrates the importance of looking at aviation with an intersectional lens (Hendricks *et al.*, 2021; Acker, 2012). Social class, ethnicity, gender and bodily dispositions have been part of earlier discriminatory practices (Moore and Taylor, 2021; Baum, 2012; Mills, 1998) but today interact with other forms of inequality related to outsourcing and hiring of foreign, non-unionized crews on lower pay, fewer employee benefits, and more insecure employment. The analysis, however, illustrates a certain degree of gender homogenization of body representations, as so far as the demands and expectations of women and men in the company “meet in the middle”. There is greater acceptance that women wear traditional masculine symbols such as trousers and flat shoes, while male cabin crew can use make-up. In the analysis, colleagues seemed to celebrate the gay male flight attendant as the ideal-typical emotional labourer in the cabin, attributed with special caring qualities, humour and exceptional service orientation. This is in contrast to some low-cost airlines where they still celebrate and exploit young women’s aesthetic labour (Ren, 2017; Spiess and Waring, 2005).

Cabin work is a tough and demanding job and the aviation industry is characterized by turbulence, turnaround and crisis, with employees facing insecure futures. Hagesæther (2014) fears that the competition and high pace of change in the industry will affect safety and that new organizational business models and outsourcing of staff will weaken the basic pillars of the Nordic model of working life, which includes a permanent job, regulated working conditions and collaboration between management and unions (Bungum *et al.*, 2015; Dølvik *et al.*, 2015). The situation was aggravated further by the COVID-19 lockdown, the grounding of the majority of airline fleets, closed borders and dismissals of crew. Which air carriers will survive is partly dependent on future travel patterns and tourism. I hypothesize that we might see an evolution from emotional labour to *emotional work* in cabin crew, demands for emotion and personal service in the interaction with passengers being reduced. However, by selling their labour, cabin crew must deal with the emotions and practical challenges that arise in their lives due to poor working conditions. The role of trade unions in mitigating de-professionalization and how employees experience and handle increased precarization and insecurity are topics in my current research.

Conclusion

I have analysed the emotional labour of cabin crew in three eras, the 1960s/1970s, around the millennium, and today based on qualitative data from a Scandinavian airline. The analysis shows that emotional labour deals with different aspects in different historical and cultural contexts, the flight attendant no longer being a feminized and iconic profession surrounded by glamour. The analysis illustrates an intermediate period of increased diversity of the workforce and passengers, a struggle for professionalization, a job for life, and a fight against global, gendered and sexualized flight attendant stereotypes. The scope for exercising emotional labour is today reduced. Boundary regulation in interaction with passengers is now a central element in cabin work that is intensified, devalorized and precarious. The profession has changed from being a well-paid occupation for upper and middle-class women before getting married to becoming a full-time job and a life-long employment for women and men in the company. Long-term cabin work with proper pay and good working conditions seems, however, to be dissolving. Much indicates that the profession is again becoming a temporary one of demanding work with poor working conditions in a polarized and class-divided labour market.

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