

The Role of Workplace Culture in Shaping Body Image Perceptions in Aviation

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ABSTRACT

With the growing proliferation of mass media and social media, body image concerns among individuals have gained scholarly attention in recent times. The current study aims to delve into such concerns among women in aviation and investigate the role of workplace culture in this. To accomplish the aim, qualitative data from 15 women working in the aviation sector was collected and analyzed through NVivo. It was found that workplace culture has a significant impact on body image perceptions of women in the aviation industry. Peer comparisons and counselling, work-life balance, organizational role, and organizational protocols were some of the prominent themes identified under study. The study findings reveal that the workplace culture of the aviation industry promotes the atmosphere wherein the appearance of the employees is more important. This results in adding pressure resulting in behavioural changes among women in the aviation industry.

Keywords: body image, aviation, workplace culture, appearance

1.1 Introduction

Body image conceptualisations have existed for centuries but the subject could attain scholarly attention only in recent decades (Andersen and Swami, 2021). After much debate, body image has been found to be a multidimensional and subjective construct that denotes an individual's relationship with own body (Prnjak *et al.*, 2022). Body image encompasses perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioural dimensions. A positive self-perception leads to body satisfaction whereas a negative self-perception may lead to body dissatisfaction. Individuals can have differing attitudes and behavioural responses towards their own body image (El Ansari, Dibba and Stock, 2014; Datt, 2023). Body image is a dynamic concept that keeps changing over the time due to a change in situations, context, accepted social norms, and continuously changing body ideals in the media (Hardie, Oshiro and Dixon, 2022). An individual can have different self-perceptions throughout his life span (Tiggemann, 2004).

Body image concerns are on a rise among women today mainly due to an increased exposure to mass media and social media that establish idealized body images for women. The advertisements and conversations on these platforms emphasize on achieving a desirable body shape and weight for them. Women internalize with these standards and in case where discrepancies are found, they experience negative body image (Andersen and Swami, 2021). Body image concerns start to develop in the childhood itself through the influences of family, peers, and society (Laus, Almeida and Klos, 2018). However, growing up, the factor of workplace culture also becomes significant, particularly in a few industries like hospitality and aviation (Datt and Vandana, 2024).

In the industry, workplace culture also defines the mandates regarding physical appearance of employees. The industry prescribes a long list of standards, especially for particular roles like cabin crew, requiring the staff to adhere to specific weight and height, which is in line with the guidelines from the regulators as well (Datt and Vandana, 2024). The industry works on the belief that its employees can significantly influence the customer satisfaction levels, which is a factor of their training and executive presence. It evokes positive emotions about the brand and customers often perceive an enhanced service quality thus ultimately affecting customers' intention to purchase and re-purchase the services of a particular airline. Thus, the workplace culture of good executive presence and

grooming standards of the employees is associated with a positive emotional response from the customers (Choi *et al.*, 2020).

Researches claim that as compared to men, women are often more vulnerable to body image issues (El Ansari, Dibba and Stock, 2014). A continuous pressure to abide by prescribed standards and maintain an idealized body image often causes self-consciousness among women in aviation. They experience stress which negatively affects their physical, mental, and emotional health. Moreover, a positive body image in the industry is also found to be significantly correlated to career advancement opportunities and an improved job satisfaction thus affecting the overall quality of life for women (Slathia, 2024). As the existing studies focus was restricted to studying the concept of body image or the influence of body image issues without having much focus on the aviation sector women, therefore, there was need to understand how the predominance of the physical appearance in the aviation industry results in influencing body image among women in aviation sector. To fulfil this need, this study focuses on answering the question, "What is the influence of workplace culture on the body image perceptions among women staff in the aviation industry?"

1.2 Aim of the paper

The paper aims at investigating how workplace culture influence shape the body image perceptions for women in aviation industry.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3. Importance of workplace culture in the aviation industry: a critical-empirical review

Workplace culture or organizational culture can be defined as the framework which is developed to ensure that all the organizational efforts are directed towards a common goal. It binds organizational members and brings cohesion in the workplace. In their study, (Klimas, 2016) present the findings of a qualitative exploratory study that aimed to investigate about the role of organizational culture in coopetition. The study encapsulates there exist significant cultural differences between coopetitors versus non-coopetitors in the Polish aviation industry thus confirming the role of organizational culture in aviation.

An organizational culture of underrepresentation of women was emphasized by McCarthy, Budd and Ison (2015) in their study based upon in-depth interviews of both men and women working as cabin crew in the UK airlines. It was stressed that there are many hindrances to fair participation of women in the industry which affects gender diversity and leadership. An empirical study encompassing the review of empirical studies over a period of 25 years (1996-2020) was undertaken by Gorlin and Bridges (2021) to highlight how gender roles in aviation culture influence women pilots' overall experience. Through a hermeneutic methodological framework, it was deduced under study that the industry reflects biased and discriminatory cultural perspectives towards women pilots. As per the research available from other countries, there seems to be a dominance of masculine culture in aviation industry that significantly reduces the working experiences and workplace performances of women pilots.

Another study that was conducted in almost a similar context to explore the role of paternalistic leadership and personality traits on workplace alienation and workplace environment in Pakistan's aviation industry by Shahzad *et al.* (2022). The study was based on a sample of 723 respondents, selected through a convenience sampling method. The study utilized a variance-based structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed structural model. It was concluded in the study that paternalistic leadership and personality characteristics have a significant and positive impact on workplace alienation and workplace culture. It was revealed under the study that employees in aviation often feel disconnected and dissatisfied with their work under paternalistic leadership. The study therefore laid emphasis on the need to promote cohesiveness in the organization to enhance workforce satisfaction in aviation.

In this regard, another empirical survey of 400 employees, selected through simple random sampling method, from the aviation sector in Banten was conducted by Novitasari *et al.* (2022). The study used questionnaires that were distributed online on social media platforms. The study aimed to identify the relation between organizational culture to motivation and performance of the employees, and the relation between workplace environment to motivation and performance of the employees. It was deduced that a positive and significant relationship exists among all these variables thus indicating that organizational culture and workplace environment are important to influence the motivation and

performance levels of employees in aviation.

The discussion indicates that organizational culture has a prominent role in aviation industry. It not only affects the job satisfaction of employees but also determine their performance and retention. However, there is a dearth of studies that explored the role of organizational culture in shaping body image perceptions in aviation.

1.3. Empirical review on the presence, factors affecting, and the impact of body image issues in the aviation sector

In a study conducted by Choi *et al.* (2020), researchers modified and extended the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model to establish that customers' service quality perceptions are influenced by physical attractiveness of employees working as flight attendants in Asian carriers. Thus, body image is a prominent factor in the industry. The study to investigate the impact of uniform of flight attendants on their attitudes and behaviours perceived by customers was undertaken by Güngör and Önlér (2021). The study deduced that physical appearance is an important determinant of organization's culture and customers' perceptions of the quality in aviation. Uniforms help customers to frame the first impression of airline quality and the behaviour of its staff. Thus, it was confirmed that aviation industry's uniform-related requirements for roles that are customer-facing exist.

In a study conducted in context of Indonesia, feminization of flight attendants was debated by Simorangkir (2021). The study argued that female flight attendants were portrayed as those having a perfect body shape and properly geared up in uniforms. Nonetheless, the study asserts that gender stereotypes do exist in the aviation sector that often make women conscious of how they are perceived in the society.

An empirical study to assess the impact of aviation industry's strict parameters to adhere to specific grooming guidelines on the body image, stress levels, and work performance of women employees was undertaken by Datt and Mehrotra (2024). The study found that women employees tend to be more conscious of their body image which at times leads them towards feeling disengagement from work and significantly diminishes their work performance and efficiency. Thus, the study recommended policy reforms and organizational support to ensure mental health of women employees in aviation. The discussion reveals that executive presence is of paramount importance in aviation leading to stress and anxiety among the employees. However, there are rarely studies that adopted a comprehensive review of how workplace culture can be positively transformed to encourage positive body image perceptions of employees in aviation.

1.3. Impact of workplace culture on body image issues

Workplace culture is critical in determining the nature and extent of body image issues among employees. How one carries himself/herself at the workplace and how others in the system react to it make a difference. The judgments about body's appearance including the colour, weight, shape, hairstyle, makeup, uniform, and cleanliness have an impact on self-perceptions of body image. Organizations that do not control prejudices against employees on the grounds of their physical appearance or lookism fail to obtain employee satisfaction and optimum productivity (Small, 2022). In a study conducted by Smith *et al.* (2023), it was argued that aviation industry's workplace environment pressurizes women flight attendants to adhere to gendered aesthetic norms. The study asserts that organizational culture and policies in aviation establish a standardized figure of an ideal worker that is commonly biased against women. The study considers three factors: organisational rules, peer-surveillance, and self-surveillance which may affect the body image perceptions of women employees in the industry. In a similar context, Ren (2017) underlines that the organizational culture in aviation is driven by the belief that customer facing roles and employees in front end roles represent the brand image which is a potential source of competitive advantage. Thus, customer facing roles at the airport and inside the cabin in the industry are imposed regulations which demand them to always maintain physical appearance. There are regulations which require cabin crew to maintain a certain limit of BMI. Such regulations and expectations lead women to get involved in unthoughtful diet and lifestyle regimes.

Thus, when a profession requires people to focus on their body, weight and BMI, the workplace culture will play an important role in facilitating this in a healthy manner by having a performance focused culture, while ensuring regularity requirements are met.

1.4 Methodology

To accomplish the objectives of study, the study adheres to the following procedures.

1.4. Data

The study involves primary data which is the first-hand and original data that is collected specifically for the purpose of study in hand

1.4. Research

The study is descriptive research that aims at providing in-depth analysis of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2014). The data collected under the study is qualitative in nature that has been descriptively analyzed to describe the issue of body image among women working in the aviation.

1.4. Sample Size and Target Population

The target population for the study comprises of 15 women working in the aviation industry, in cabin crew and support roles.

1.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

A semi-structured open-ended questionnaire was designed for the purpose of primary data collection. The questionnaire contained questions relating to basic demographic information about the respondents including their current roles and experience in the aviation. Also, the questionnaire enquired about the kind of body image issues they confront at the workplace and how workplace culture is responsible for such issues.

The analysis of primary data in this study is based on NVivo-based thematic analysis. The data obtained has been first analyzed using this qualitative analysis software, NVivo 4.0, and then a detailed thematic analysis has been provided based on the themes identified through the software.

1.5 Data Analysis

1.5. Demographic Profile

The respondents under study comprised 15 women, 12 of which were working as cabin crew members and 3 in various support functions in the aviation industry. As it can be seen from the table below, except 3 respondents, all the 12 respondents had some prior experience in the aviation sector. This indicates they have an experience of more than one workplace culture thus could better compare and conclude whether all the firms in aviation industry have similar issues or is it a firm-specific issue that leads to body image concerns among women.

Respondents	Year of Joining	Group	Prior Aviation Experience
A	2015	Cabin Crew	No
B	2016	Cabin Crew	Yes
C	2016	Cabin Crew	Yes
D	2016	Cabin Crew	Yes
E	2022	Support function	Yes
F	2016	Cabin Crew	No
G	2016	Cabin Crew	Yes
H	2016	Cabin Crew	Yes
I	2016	Cabin Crew	Yes
J	2021	Support function	No
K	2016	Support function	Yes
L	2017	Cabin Crew	Yes
M	2019	Cabin Crew	Yes
N	2013	Cabin Crew	Yes
O	2024	Cabin Crew	Yes

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

1.5. Thematic Analysis

Based on data, eight nodes were identified for the study. These nodes help to comprehend how workplace culture influences body image of women in aviation and what factors work behind this.



Figure 1: Word cloud for participants responses

The thematic analysis reveals that respondents laid stress on terms like “appearance” and “look” as they appeared 116 and 114 times respectively during transcripts. Along with these terms, “confidence” appeared 87 times, “feel” 84 times, and “role” 60 times in the transcripts. This clearly indicates that appearance and look affect confidence and how one feels about the body. The importance of varied organizational roles was also found important in this context.

Theme	Key elements	Description
Workplace environment influence	workplace standards, look, appearance	Workplace culture in aviation encourages focus on executive presence, grooming and health
Peer comparisons	colleagues, around, workplace, see, polished	Peer comparisons at workplace effect self-perceptions of own body
Workplace role expectations	Appearance, role, pressure	Workplace role determines what kind of grooming standards, weight, BMI is expected
Workplace dynamics	Confidence, appearance, look, performance, interact	Body image perceptions influence interpersonal relations and workplace dynamics
Executive presence	confidence, look, presence, executive, role, and professionalism	Executive presence may differ from individual to individual
Work-life balance	Aviation, family, flexibility, balance, happier	Aviation industry poses work-life balance challenges that also effects body's appearance perceptions
Organizational protocols	Flexibility, norms, fair, employee morale	Organizational protocols need to be employee-friendly to encourage positive behavioral changes
Peer counselling	Exposure, internalize, self-image perceptions	Peer counselling may influence self-image perceptions hence positive mentoring must be promoted

Table 2: Thematic table

Executive Presence

Executive presence signifies an individual's ability to influence those around, comprising the seniors, colleagues, and subordinates in workplace settings. It is the competence to emerge as a leader and

making one's presence felt in the group (Dagley and Gaskin, 2014). Self-perceptions about own body influences the confidence to persuade others.

Almost everyone agreed to the role of body image in executive presence at the workplace in aviation industry. The respondents contemplated that how one carries himself/herself at the workplace changes others' perceptions. Having an executive presence led others perceive one in a positive way. This is evident below:

"how well you know you're carrying yourself. It just changes the perception." (Respondent A)

However, some respondents did not feel the significance of body image in executive presence, which may be based upon their personal experiences. As an example, Respondent K said,

"the executive presence might not be that important, but it's just become a part of,"

Thus, it can be deduced that executive presence is an important aspect of aviation industry which is influenced by women employees' self-perceptions of their physical appearances at workplace.

Peer Comparisons

It is a human tendency to compare themselves with people around them. This phenomenon is usually referred to as peer comparisons. While forming self-perceptions of own body, people seek acceptance of those around at workplace, including the seniors, colleagues, and juniors. Following transcript indicates the same:

"I'd compare myself to others and think, 'Why can't I look like that?'" (Respondent D)

Such comparisons of how others look and carry themselves determine whether an individual would have a positive self-image or negative self-image. The same has been found to be true in case of aviation as well where the industry prescribes high grooming standards for employees. As one respondent shared,

"I'd see my friends in the industry, all looking so polished and trim, and I felt like I was falling short, you know?"

(Respondent G)

The analysis reflects whether such peer comparisons are undertaken intentionally or unintentionally, they do lead to behavioral changes in most cases. If taken positively, these comparisons motivate an individual to work hard to match the peer standards however if taken in a negative sense, this may lead to severe attitudinal and behavioral issues.

"When I came into aviation and I and I saw you know, kind of perfect people around me. So I put a little bit more effort into losing weight or looking good or, or doing a little bit of makeup change in a hairstyle coming to work." (Respondent M)

Thus, peer comparisons at workplace are an important determinant of body image perceptions of women in aviation. It should be ensured that the organizational culture must encourage positive peer comparisons rather than promoting bullying and teasing.

Organizational Protocols

As mentioned above, organizational protocols have an impact on the kind of body image employees develop at the workplace. Organizations that promote strict adherence to appearance-related standards, similarly to what happens in aviation, develop an organizational culture of being presentable. However, rather than imposing it on employees, when they are encouraged and counselled to follow these norms, the chances of any conflicts are lower.

"We have to stick to certain, um, grooming standards, which can sometimes feel like a lot of, you know, pressure."

(Respondent D)

Workplace experiences do influence how an individual perceives their own body. It is therefore recommended that organizational protocols are flexible and employee-friendly. The same could be assessed from transcripts as well that employees prefer adhering to norms when they believe these have been designed keeping their requirements in mind.

"it's important for organizations to consider, you know, providing uniforms that accommodate a variety of body types so that everyone feels comfortable and confident." (Respondent G)

Thus, organizational protocols can be said to play a critical role in determining not only body image

perceptions of women in aviation but also their job performance and satisfaction levels.

Peer Counselling

As discussed earlier, peer comparisons do occur at aviation workplaces, whether consciously or unconsciously. Subsequently, it has also been found that peer counselling is important to control negative self-perceptions and promote positive thinking about self-body. The employees expect their companies to offer some employee wellness programs which teach them to handle negative emotions. Like one respondent said,

"I've, like, gotten really involved in some of the employee wellness programs here at my airline where I work.."
(Respondent B)

The analysis also reveals that women in aviation understand the role of peer counselling. They place a great importance on developing trust among each other because it helps them to sustain the pressure of work. When employees are made to feel good about their bodies through peer support at an individual or organizational level, there is better job satisfaction.

"The bond you form with your crew is really strong because you have to rely on each other a lot, especially when things get tough." (Respondent G)

Thus, it can be deduced that peer counselling should be given emphasis at aviation firms. It is not only a means to make employees feel confident about themselves but is also important to secure their retention.

Work-life Balance

Work-life balance is one of the most crucial aspects of modern workplaces. Aviation industry is often considered as a tough industry in this respect due to uneven and demanding working hours. The employees in aviation are expected to stay away from their homes for longer periods which often disturb their personal lives, especially women. There are erratic working hours and it is difficult to maintain a set routine.

"You know, in this line of work, your schedule can change basis operational requirements, and it's not always easy to, um, maintain a routine." (Respondent C)

The respondents were enquired about their experiences of how they maintain their work-life balance in such an industry. An individual's body image is not only about the body's physical appearance, it also encompasses the concept of functionality. Long working hours often disrupt the sleep patterns and may affect an individual's physical and mental well-being.

"it can be physically and mentally demanding too. We have long hours, sometimes odd shifts, and it can be challenging to balance work with personal life." (Respondent I)

The analysis of transcripts leaves no doubt that work-life balance is a major concern of women in aviation. Odd working hours along with a consistent pressure to maintain appearance and spend time in grooming can often contribute to employees' stress levels.

Workplace Dynamics

The interpersonal relationships that an employee develops at the workplace has an impact on overall experience at the workplace. Body image is believed to play a big role in how an individual carries himself/herself at the workplace. With a positive self-perception about own body's appearance, there is a greater confidence to build harmonious relationships at work.

"Physically, how my body is and how I am looking plays a huge, huge role in my performance, in my confidence level and in everything that I do in my day-to-day job." (Respondent A)

The respondents were affirmative on this question that their body image perceptions affect their behaviours and performances at the workplace. It is how well the employees can interact with others around that determine the quality of a workplace. The women in aviation confirmed that when they do not feel confident about their appearances, they find it difficult to collaborate and work.

"If I hadn't felt as good about my appearance, I might have struggled more with the interaction." (Respondent I)

Thus, it is evident that body image is an important aspect of workplace dynamics. A positive self-perception of employees is the base of a healthy workplace in aviation.

Workplace Environment

This is the fundamental theme of current study to identify the role of workplace environment and culture on women employees body image perception in aviation. The industry offers a fair gender ratio as compared to most other industries where females occupy a negligible percentage of total workforce.

"for a cabin crew profile it is very important to have a proper or you know your health. Your height and weight

has to be as per certain BMI criteria.” (Respondent A)

Nonetheless, the overall workplace environment in aviation, despite of gender and roles, is driven by the principle of maintaining specific presentation standards among customers. When everyone around is well-groomed, it lays an unconscious pressure to match those levels. As one of the respondents elicited,

“everyone in aviation has to maintain a certain standard. It’s like, you’re representing the company, and how you look can make a big difference.” (Respondent G)

Thus, executive presence in aviation is not just an employee-related aspect, it is considered to convey corporate image in front of the stakeholders. The grooming of the staff is crucial to communicate that the company is committed to offering its customers an experience to cherish.

Workplace Role Expectations

While in general, aviation is an industry that demands its employees to specifically adhere to appearance norms, the standards differ as per roles. The roles which encompass more customer dealing, which serve as the face of the company for the customers are expected to lay more emphasis on how they groom and carry themselves. It is believed that groomed employees can influence customers’ emotions regarding service quality and purchase intentions. Apart from customers, it also affects the perceptions of other stakeholders in the industry. This was confirmed during the analysis of transcripts.

“And specially now, when you’re in a role where you have stakeholders, where you have to talk to people where you are, you know, where you have to wear, you sort of have to always be available for somebody to reach out to you for anything. I think it’s always better to be dressed in formals.” (Respondent A)

The current study bifurcates respondents into crew members and support roles. The crew members are usually given more pressure to maintain their appearances as per norms. Thus, the employee’s role in the workplace has a bearing on body image perceptions.

1.6 Conclusion

Workplace culture is important in shaping body image perceptions of individuals. Every organization has a specific culture that influences the relationships the employees develop with their own bodies. The same has been found true in aviation as well where executive presence, uniform and grooming standards are an important dimension of workplace culture. The industry operates on strict appearance standards for its employees. Moreover, there is role-based work division in aviation hence women are often more subjected to feel the pressure of maintaining good physical appearance. The study identified sub-factors like the influence of peers, division of roles, work-life balance, and organizational policies etc. that are instrumental in shaping positive and negative self-perceptions among women in aviation. The respondents also agreed to that certain roles, specifically those involving higher customer interaction require more attention on personal grooming than others. Additionally, it has also been found that organizations that believe in motivating employees rather than imposing appearance-based standards on them tend to achieve better employee performance and satisfaction. Overall, it can be deduced that aviation industry, because of the business being customer facing requires and hence promotes an organizational culture of executive presence and well groomed employees which leads to behavioral changes among employees, especially women working in the industry.

1.7 Implications

From the study, it is evident that aviation industry’s appearance-driven workplace culture has a lasting impact on its employees. The findings of the study can prove helpful in policy making and training programs for the organizations operating in this industry. Additionally, it can also prove useful for individuals working in the industry as it offers an insight on how body image concerns are influenced at the workplace. The workplace culture in aviation must promote harmonious relationships among staff by controlling any incidences of body shaming and encouraging peer counselling. Similarly, a change in mindset of both employees and organizations is needed that women are not merely an object to please customers, they are hired for their functionality in respective roles. In fact, a major part of cabin attendants training is focused on safety and first aid. They may be expected to maintain grooming guidelines, but on board the aircraft, they are primarily responsible for the safety of all the passengers.

1.8 Limitations and Scope for Further Study

The study considered varied dimensions of workplace culture in aviation industry and how it affects the body image perceptions of women working in the industry. Still due to time and resource

constraints, the study is limited in its scope. It only considers the employees' perspective thus failing to offer a 360degree insight on the issue. It can therefore be highly recommended that a study on this subject combining the opinions of both employer and employees in aviation is required to fill this gap.

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1.10 Appendix - Questionnaire

1. Please tell me something about yourself. What are your hobbies and interests?
2. How long have you been working in the aviation sector and when did you join your current organization?
3. Did you find any major difference in the organizational culture from your previous and current experience?
4. How do you feel your self-perceptions about your own body have changed over the time working in the industry?
5. What factors in your organization do you feel encourage or discourage your self-perception of the body?
6. Do you think there is undue pressure in aviation industry regarding employees' physical appearance? Please justify with examples.
7. How do you think people around you influence your confidence of body's appearance?
8. Do you find any work-life challenges at your workplace and how do you cope with that?
9. How far do you think body image perceptions influence executive presence at workplace?
10. Anything that you would like to recommend relating to organizational protocols in context of appearance standards?