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Southwest Airlines Flight Attendants: A Study of Burnout and Quality of Life

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SOUTHWEST AIRLINES FLIGHT ATTENDANTS:

An Examination of Burnout and Quality of Life

A Thesis Presented to the
Faculty of the University Honors Program
Northeastern Illinois University

Submitted to the faculty of Northeastern Illinois University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
University Honors Program for Graduation with Honors

Lori Light
May 2023



HONORS SENIOR PROJECT
ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL FORM

Student Name

Title of Senior Project

This senior project has been reviewed by the faculty of the NEIU Honors Program and is found to be in good order in content, style, and mechanical accuracy. It is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the NEIU Honors Program and graduation with honors.

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AUTHOR NOTE

This research is a passion that developed for me throughout the last seven years while providing peer support work with flight attendants struggling with alcohol and substance use disorders. It is important for me to share this information because flight attendants are misunderstood by the public and underrepresented in research. It is difficult work, taking a physical and emotional toll on the workers who are called to the profession. I'm humbled and in awe of the women who came before me who advocated for and created the labor unions that keep flight attendants protected today. I'm grateful for the life that the job has provided me with, specifically the opportunity to expand my wings, gain an education, and learn new things about myself and others. I would not be a social worker if I was not a flight attendant, so I must express my gratitude to the person who led me down this path.

This paper is dedicated to my best friend, Zach Berry, who gained his forever wings in October of 2021. You are my inspiration to be my favorite version of myself. I will never stop making you proud.

ABSTRACT

This study examines whether flight attendant lifestyles, including commutes, relationships, home life, and seniority, are associated with burnout levels, quality of life, and difficulty detaching from work during time off. Participants were collected through a private Facebook page for Southwest Airlines flight attendants, and responded from varying locations, seniority groups, and demographic categories. It was hypothesized that being employed during the pandemic would indicate higher burnout levels, regardless of whether participants opted to fly during that time. In addition, we proposed that commuting flight attendants that travel to their base by airplane have a lower quality of life and psychological detachment scores than those who live within driving distance from the base. In addition, it was proposed that relationships are essential to flight attendant quality of life and burnout levels. The findings revealed that newly hired flight attendants are less burned out than those employed in 2020 and 2021, and that spending time with coworkers on layovers is correlated with lower burnout levels. It was also revealed that parents of young children and teenagers have higher levels of burnout.

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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Throughout aviation history, the flight attendant career has been glamorized and sexualized. Many changes in the culture of aviation as well as accessibility have shifted the role of flight attendants from being seen as sex symbols and waitresses in the sky to first responders in emergency situations as well as power-hungry megalomaniacs. Deregulation of the airline industry in the 1970's and the rise of accessible travel in the 80's and 90's made flying a much less glamorous experience, and then, 9/11 changed the role of the flight attendant forever. Still, there is illusory shine to the position, one often portrayed by the media with common tropes of flight attendants as alcoholics, promiscuous women, or overtly feminine gay men. As comedic or entertaining these tropes may be, the reality behind the media portrayal of this intriguing career choice toll of the hard work of flight attendants affects their physical and mental health as well as their relationships. A 2003 qualitative study conducted with Italian female flight attendants highlighted this. "Stress and mental health problems were of concern to this category of working women and several work-related risk factors were identified, such as isolation and solitude, fears of being inadequate partners and mothers due to job demands, difficult passenger relationships, and lack of protection on the part of employers" (Ballard, et al., 2003, 165). These problems have only been exacerbated by additional stress brought on by the pandemic. Görlich and Stadelman (2020) surveyed German flight attendants and discovered "significant positive correlations of the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress with subjective stressors, namely, time pressure and work intensity, fatigue, the psychological and physical demands of the flight profile, and the burdens of on-call duty."

Over the course of the pandemic, flight attendants often bore the brunt of passenger misconduct and anger due to mask enforcement or lack of alcohol service on board. Stories shared by news media outlets highlighted the lack of respect for the work that these individuals do daily to keep their passengers safe, often putting themselves in danger, for the safety of the passengers on board their aircraft. Marie Hunter (2022) for CNN reported, “5981 reports of unruly passengers were logged by the FAA in 2021. Nearly 72% of these reports were mask-related incidents... Before 2021, the FAA didn’t track the number of unruly passengers incidents because the number was fairly inconsistent. But a sharp tick in unruly passenger behavior in 2020 spurred the agency to begin tracking reports in 2021.”

Today, more than ever, it feels as though the public is unaware of what the role of the flight attendant is. Though they may bring you your drinks and snacks, flight attendants have an important safety role: their primary purpose for being on the aircraft is to act as first responders in life-saving situations, coordinating the evacuation of an aircraft in emergency situations. In addition to stress on the job, minimal pay for junior flight attendants and increasing expenses for commuting flight attendants generate stress because of the unpredictability of the schedules, the nature of being constantly on call, and the fact flight attendants are unsure of whether their flights home will be empty enough for them to get a seat. It is not a job for the weak and still it is a job that does not garner the respect that it deserves.

As a flight attendant with over 17 years of experience, I have found the rising struggles of my workgroup as motivation for my research. The strains of working with the public in a society that has become much more self-focused and individualistic over

the last 20 years creates a toxic work environment and distressing relationships between airlines, passengers, and crews. There is also an often toxic environment between crewmembers themselves. This community environment which was once full of camaraderie on flights and energetic layovers, shifted greatly with the rise of technology and individualism. Prior to smart phones, van rides to hotels and back to the airport were often filled with stories of the day before, or travels of the past. Today they are usually silent, with each crew member scrolling on their devices before getting on the plane to watch passengers do the same. On layovers, many crewmembers opt to spend their time alone, rather than exploring or dining with the rest of the crew. For those who continued to choose to spend their layovers with others, their nights of camaraderie and community were turned quickly into nights of isolation and fear in 2020. As a result, flight attendants today are dealing with burnout, increasing the likelihood of residual mental health issues like anxiety and depression, resulting in lasting physical problems, as well as substance use disorders (Maslach, 2006).

Most individuals spend one third of their lives at work. Through economic necessities and scientific developments, an entire new field of behavioral science research has emerged: an industry focused on researching the psychology of people at work. Despite the popularity of this role, examinations on the psychology of flight attendants and their roles within their companies and their homes are lacking. Existing research on flight attendants and the impact of the job on their lives has largely been in support of, or in response to, Arlie Hochschild's seminal work, *The Managed Heart*, where she provided an ethnographic study on Delta flight attendants in the early 1980²s allowing the emergence of the concept of emotional labor. Other research has examined quality of life,

as well as impacts on the job on flight attendant physical health, and impacts of the job on home dynamics. Karkala et al.'s 2020 study examined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on sleep, stress, and other psychosomatic factors on aviation population in Greece, but did not differentiate flight attendants from pilots, mechanics, and other aviation employees.

My research will focus on flight attendants at Southwest Airlines. Southwest Airlines is a domestic low-cost carrier in the United States which has historically believed in promoting a company culture that has valued three specific qualities in their employees: fun-loving attitudes, warrior spirits, and servant hearts. The airline has doubled in size since 2009, which combined with shifts in values due to technology and individualism, as well as a heightened political climate, has led to a drastic change in company culture.

My research will examine seniority, home life, community of coworkers, and living in base as factors which contribute to a flight attendants' burnout and ability to create meaning in their lives at work and outside of work. Examining the impact of these variables on the lives of flight attendants and their burnout levels is essential because, ultimately, flight attendants are safety professionals. Because research regarding the protection of the health and well-being of these professionals is lacking, this examination can provide insight into how these hardworking professionals can be better supported by their employer, their coworkers, and their loved ones.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Flight Attendants and Emotional Labor

When boarding a commercial aircraft, passengers are greeted by a flight attendant whose smile is as essential to their presentation of their company as their uniform. Arlie Hochschild's sociological ethnography conducted on Delta Flight Attendants in the early 1980's titled *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Feeling* (1984) focuses on the reality of the person and the emotions behind their smile. Ms. Hochschild spent a year surveying flight attendants in initial training, annual requalification training, and on the job. She became deeply intimate with the unique experiences of this workgroup and the troubles they face because of the kind of performance that is required for them to be perceived as doing a good job. The author coined the term "emotional labor", which she uses "to mean the management of a feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*" (1984, 7). As she examines the unique environment in which flight attendants use their skills to act their way through hard days, Hochschild explores what the real cost of emotional labor is to the employees and their personal lives. Various problems are presented, as the flight attendants interviewed explain issues in relationships, social lives, home lives, and problems differentiating their realities from the persona they project in uniform. Hochschild explains the importance of transmutation of feeling in the introductory chapter of her book, where she states, "There is a cost to emotion work: it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel" (1984, 21).

Hochschild's work has been important in researching the roles of individuals in customer facing positions, especially flight attendants, because it examines the differences of experiences that people of different genders and socioeconomic classes

experience when working in emotional labor roles. As it was written prior to 9/11, some of the more complex issues that flight attendants deal with today are not addressed, so it's a bit outdated. Nonetheless, her work is helpful in examining of what kind of experiences flight attendants have that contribute to increased mental health problems and substance use issues.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital is a term which has been used by many different social sciences as well economists and as such, lacks one solid definition. Nahapiet and Goshal (1998) believe the central proposition of social capital theory is that networks of relationships constitute a valuable resource for the conduct of social affairs. In contrast social capital theorist Tristan Claridge (2018) believes that social capital is far from unified, varying in differences and measurements, as applicable to economics as it is to relationships. Because social capital lacks unification there are criticisms, which can make applying this theory to research difficult. Per Mr. Claridge, applying social capital theory to research requires serious intention and consideration. The best approaches are those that maintain and embrace the specific context being investigated and approaches that allow for complexity to be maintained rather than simplification and aggregation that often involves assumption and confusion of causality.

For this paper, social capital theory is applied to conceptualize the complexities of the role of flight attendant caused by performing emotional labor while also strengthening relationships with others. Because the job requires a certain amount of trust that is immediate when working with a new crew member, when that trust is solidified, it is easy for relationships to develop quickly. Thus, Southwest Airlines flight crews have,

historically, easily developed bonding social capital. This is easily witnessed as a passenger onboard a Southwest Airlines flight. Most crews look as though they have been working together for years and joke as though they're more than strangers, though that is usually not the case. Bonding social capital within the workplace can act as a positive outcome during good times and can also support negative outcomes during times of struggle. As a result of bonding and feeling as one in times of struggle, like the years of the height of the pandemic, many Southwest Airlines flight attendants have adapted a relationship with other employees and their employer that is untrusting and perhaps cautious, creating ruptures in an environment that prevents bonding social capital.

Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) is a stress theory created by Dr. Steven Hobfoll in 1989 which explains psychological stress as result of the threat of loss of resources, actual lost resources, and the lack of gain after exhausting resources. COVID-19 made clear what Dr. Hobfoll (2001) has described as being captive to the availability of our resources and how easily they are shared and stable (340). Resources of high value to flight attendants are job stability, financial freedom, travel, and relationships. When flight attendants are constrained through factors such as seniority, lack of financial resources, difficult commutes, and scheduling issues, valuable resources such as community and time away from work are unavailable increasing burnout and lack of ability to regenerate vital resources necessary for the emotional labor of the work.

THE LITERATURE

Work and Family

Early research on the flight attendant profession and the effects of the job on family life was started during the sexual revolution. E. Tarasova (2018) compared results of a survey conducted with 195 female flight attendants employed by Russian airlines with a 1979 study of female flight attendants employed by an American carrier, no longer in service. Both studies examined only women, thus exploring the role reversal and exchange of household duties required of households when the wife is a flight attendant. Tarasova's research contradicted the earlier research by finding that married women were more satisfied with the work than single women. Tarasova believes that the change in dynamics around women's work and family life precipitated by the sexual revolution have shifted the perspective on the role of a flight attendant, making it easier for women to have balanced home and work lives and continue to fly. Concepts of emotional labor and conservation of resources theory are applicable to these kinds of work-family conflicts, which are found throughout existing literature. Jansen, et. al., (2003) found that conflict at work can result in depleted resources in the home, and conflict at home can result in resource depletion at work. This energy depletion is tied to COR theory, as a major factor in burnout in the lives of flight attendants. Sonnetag and Natter (2004) applied COR theory to their study of flight attendants and how they spend their recovery periods away from work, whether at home or in hotels.

Physical Health and Fatigue

Previous empirical data has provided insight to the various health factors associated with career flight attendants. McNeely et al. (2004) present physical demands of the job as impacting one's emotional health as well as strained customer relations, low cabin air quality, noises, vibrations, and other various indicators of stress factors for the

physical well-being of flight crews. Mc Neely's research compared data collected from flight attendants ($N=4011$) with a national study on the health and well-being of a national sample. This study showed that flight attendants were three times more likely to have respiratory issues as well as cardiac issues. Additionally, one in three flight attendants surveyed experienced some form of sleep disorder. Though the FAA limits the number of hours that flight attendants can remain on duty as well as providing limitations for rest, additional support is needed by airline management and FAA to mitigate the fatigue and effects of sleep disorders on the flight attendant work group.

Fatigue is a regularly examined effect of the flight attendant career and existing literature provides insight on how irregular schedules and distance from home can prevent crews from experiencing proper decompression from the physical and emotional demands of the job. Sonnetag and Natter (2004) present different hypotheses with fatigue, vigor, and depression being the dependent variables. Their sample ($N = 47$) of participants from European carriers provided insight to the peculiarities of the profession. Their findings present that flight attendants get better rest in hotels than they do at home, that they are more depressed following social activities, and that physical activity is helpful in combatting depression. The summary of the study was that spending nonworking hours away from home did not have negative effect on flight attendant well-being. Karkala et al. (2022) conducted research with aviation workers in Greece and found that over 35% of their participants reported sleep issues and anxiety caused by the pandemic, a number much higher than other airline workers questioned. This study also hypothesized that this higher number could also be related to the gender of the workers, as 85% of the cabin crew members questioned were female.

Research Gaps

One of the primary reasons for this research is due to the large gaps of available literature regarding the unique lifestyles of flight attendants, compared to the research that exists pertaining to flight deck crews. In the United States, over 80% of flight attendants are women, while women make up less than 5% of flight deck crews. These calculations point to disparities that are common problems in science, namely both sexism and classism. Additionally, most research done on flight attendants has been done on flight crews from other parts of the world, from parts of Asia and all over Europe. Outside of Ms. Hochschild's groundbreaking work, research on flight attendants in the United States, particularly those employed by low-cost carriers like Southwest Airlines is lacking. Research regarding the toll of the pandemic on flight crews is also sparse. As of today, the Covid-19 pandemic and its lingering effects on our collective well-being are still being researched.

Future research will benefit by examining the impact of those days on the essential airline workers who came to work and encountered no more than 50 strangers over the course of three days, versus the normal thousands. The impact of this kind of stress caused by the emotional labor of smiling under masks and performing as if it was business as usual undoubtedly drained valuable inner resources important to the health and well-being of flight attendants.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Strategy

This study used a non-random convenience sampling. The participants ($N = 116$) were Southwest Airlines Flight Attendants representing various years of service,

domiciles, relationship status, gender, race, and sexual identities. Participants were recruited through a private Facebook page for Southwest Airlines Flight Attendants. The post asked for participation from flight attendants and explained that the purpose of the research was for a scholarly report on various factors affecting the work group. Shortly after survey participation began, it was noticed that the diversity of seniority of the respondents was lacking, so another post was made in hopes of recruiting participants with less experience. Participants were informed that the survey was confidential and that participation in the survey implied that they were giving their consent for their responses to be used for this academic report. As a resource, numbers for employee support programs were shared in the post as a reminder to participants to seek support should any questions in the survey bring about any unexpected negative emotions or feelings. The survey was optional and available for participation for 72 hrs.

Survey Instruments

In addition to basic demographic questions, other inquiries regarded demographics related to years of service as a Southwest Airlines Flight Attendants, relationship status, and parental status. Questions related to social capital inquired whether flight attendants have community outside of work with other flight attendants or civilians; whether flight attendants participate in outside activities such as church, exercise groups, or self-help groups; and whether flight attendants spend time with other crew members on their layovers. To assess the burnout levels of the participants, I utilized the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT), a 34-item questionnaire assessing core symptoms of exhaustion, mental distance, emotional impairment, and cognitive impairment as well as secondary symptoms of psychological distress and psychosomatic

complaints. The first part of the tool (BAT-C) had a Chronbach's alpha score of 0.95, and the score for the second group of questions (BAT-S) was 0.90 (Schaufeli et. al., 2020, 10). Respondents used a 5-point frequency scale to respond from never (1) to always (5).

Inquiry related to the experiences of participants and the ability to create the lifestyle promised by the lure of the job was measured through five questions related to the amount of time participants generally spent manipulating their schedules to maximize their time off, as well as the impact of time spent on their relationships. Higher averages for these scores indicated more difficulty detaching from the job on layover downtime or days off. Two additional questions related to quality of life and ability to attend important functions were also used to indicate specifics related to the flight attendant experience. Higher total scores between these two questions indicated a higher quality of life.

This study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern Illinois University for approval in February of 2023. Hypotheses of this research are 1.) Burnout levels of Southwest Airlines flight attendants employed during the height of the pandemic will be higher than those who were not hired until 2022. 2.) Flight attendants who report a strong sense of community at Southwest Airlines are less likely to experience burnout than those who do not. 3.) Burnout levels amongst flight attendants with small children or teens will be higher than those with adult children or no children. 4.) Flight attendants who travel to their base by airplane will have higher burnout levels, lower psychological detachment scores, and lower quality of life scores. 5.) Flight attendants with lower seniority will have lower burnout scores, lower psychological detachment scores, and lower quality of life scores. 6.) Highflyers (*term used by

Southwest Airlines FA's who fly more than their scheduled hours) will experience higher levels of burnout than those who fly their scheduled hours or less.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

116 Southwest Airlines flight attendants participated in this study. 85 participants were female, 24 were male, six were nonbinary, and one declined to answer. Years of service as a flight attendant was a key variable in my research; the mean was 14.63 years, and the standard deviation was 9.455. Flight attendants' relationship status and home life were inquiries in my study. 24% of participants reported being single, living alone, 9.5% reported being single, living with roommates, and 5.2% reported they were dating, nothing serious. 16.4% reported being in long-term partnerships, 18.1% reported being married, no children, 6% reported being married with young children, 2.6% said they were married with teen children, and 14.7% reported being married with adult children. 4.7% said they were divorced, no children, 1.7% reported divorced with young children, 2.6% were divorced with teenaged children, and 3.4% were divorced with adult children. Flight attendant home location was another key variable of this study. Of the participants, 70 responded yes to living in base, and 46 responded no. Another variable was the bid the participants seniority allowed them to hold. 53 of the participants were lineholders, and the rest were on reserve. Because the pandemic was a key part of my research, participants were asked what their flying looked like in 2020. 37 of the participants responded that their flying looked the same during 2020, 30 took an extended time off, 17 flew more than ever, another 17 were not hired yet, and 15 took a one-to-three-month break.

Among the key outcome variables, burnout amongst participants was measured using a 33 question Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT). The mean was 93.474 out of a maximum of 155.000 and a minimum of 37.000. The standard deviation was 24.099. Five questions were also asked related to flight attendants' ability to psychologically detach from the job. The mean for these totals was 13.871 out of a maximum of 23.000 and a minimum of 7.000. The standard deviation was 3.361. Two questions related to quality of life and ability to attend all events outside of work without interference of work schedules. The mean for these totals was 7.353 out of a maximum of 10.000 and a minimum of 2.000. The standard deviation was 1.957. These statistics give a brief overview of the variations of differences in lifestyles and important considerations in assessing burnout across the sample.

INFERENTIAL RESULTS

Seniority

Pearson's correlation test was conducted to examine the relationship between BAT scores and years of employment. Burnout and employment of eight years or less were significantly negatively correlated ($r(38) = -0.202, p = 0.030$), indicating that flight attendants with fewer years on the job are less burned out than more seasoned flyers.

Seniority was not positively correlated with detachment scores or quality of life scores.

Hours of Flying

One of the key factors that sets Southwest Airlines above other airlines for many flight attendants is the lack of minimum and maximum flying hours. This is great for allowing flexibility with scheduling, especially for individuals with families or other obligations. This research indicates a higher number of hours worked is positively

correlated with burnout levels. Working 111 hours or more each month was positively correlated with higher burnout scores. ($r(43) = 0.163, p = 0.080$). Higher hours flown also indicated more difficulty detaching from work during off hours ($p = 0.012$) as well as lower quality of life ($p = <0.015$).

Burnout and Pandemic Flying

Pearson's R correlation test was conducted to examine the relationship between BAT scores and whether participants chose to fly during the pandemic or not, as well as those who were not employed yet. Burnout and pandemic flying were not positively correlated as those who reported that they flew the same number of hours or more during 2020 or 2021 reported high burnout scores as well as those who took voluntary leave showing an insignificant statistical correlation. However, for the flight attendants who were not employed during 2020 and 2021, lower BAT indicate a statistical negative correlation ($r(16) = -0.217, p = 0.019$).

Home Life

Relationships and family life were examined as potential correlates of burnout, psychological detachment, and quality of life. There was no significant statistical difference in burnout levels between individuals who reported being married or in long term partnerships versus those who were single and divorced. However, data collected regarding parenting, indicates a significant statistical difference in burnout levels between those reporting young or teenaged children ($r(14) = 0.204, p = 0.028$) versus those who reported adult children or none.

Respondents reporting marriage or long-term partnerships did not report difficulty detaching from work, but statistics do indicate a higher quality of life ($p = 0.006$). For

participants with children, a significant statistical difference is indicated in their higher scores of detachment difficulties ($p = 0.077$), but there was no statistical difference indicated in quality of life.

Other Relationships

As indicated in the theoretical framework for this study, relationships are a core part of flight attendant well-being. Correlations between burnout and time spent with other crew members were examined. Respondents to the survey who replied that they always spend time with their crews on their layovers indicated a significantly lower level of burnout ($r(22) = -0.304$, $p < .001$) than those who reported that they were more likely to spend time on their own. However, Significant statistical differences indicated a higher level of burnout in the group who maintained relationships with other crewmembers outside of work ($r(35) = 0.224$, $p = 0.016$).

Other indicators of relationships as factors in burnout assessed community of supportive friends and family outside of work. A significant statistical difference indicates a positive correlation in higher burnout scores and lack of supportive community ($r(11) = 0.187$, $p = 0.045$).

No significant statistical differences indicated correlations between ability to detach from work and community of supportive coworkers and others outside of work. There was no significant statistical correlation between spending time with crew on layovers and ability to detach from work. However, a significant statistical difference ($p = 0.029$) indicates a correlation between time spent with other crew on layovers and higher levels of quality of life. Additionally, lack of supportive community outside of work was negatively correlated with quality-of-life scores ($p = 0.018$).

Commuting Flight Attendants

Some flight attendants are lucky enough to live within driving distance from where they are based, others make the decision to live in cities with lower costs of living but are forced to commute by plane to their domicile. Commuting by plane was hypothesized to impact each of the dependent variables examined in this study. When assessing burnout amongst commuting flight attendants ($N = 46$) and those who live in base ($N=70$), there was no significant statistical difference between the two groups. For detachment factors, a significant statistical difference between the two groups indicates a positive correlation between commuting and difficulty with psychologically detaching from work on their off time ($r(44)=0.184$, $p = 0.048$). No statistical difference in quality of life was measured between the two groups.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates that flight attendants who were hired after 2015 are less burned out than those hired prior. Additionally, flight attendants who fly an average of 111 hours or more per month are more burned out than individuals who fly less. Southwest Airlines offers flight attendants opportunities for overtime so it is hard to know the exact number of days that a flight attendant may work to reach their monthly hourly goal. It is estimated that individuals who fly more than 111 hours are flying 17 days per month or more.

From April 2020 through February 2021 Southwest offered flight attendants a voluntary separation package to keep costs low while Covid-19 impacted the airline. Those who opted for this benefit were able to receive 40 hours of pay per month without flying. This is the equivalent of six to seven days of work. For the flight attendants who

opted to stay on and fly, some worked their normal hours, while others opted to fly more than ever. There was no statistical difference in the burnout levels between the groups who took voluntary time off and those who continued to fly. Since 2021, Southwest has hired more than 3000 flight attendants. Eighteen out of 116 survey respondents were not employed by Southwest Airlines in 2020 or 2021. There was a significant statistical difference in the burnout levels of these participants versus those who were employed at that time.

Flight attendants who reported having young children and teenagers reported a significant difference in burnout versus those who reported having adult children or none. For the flight attendants who choose to live in cities other than where they are based, there was no significant difference in burnout levels but there was a significant difference in the ability to psychologically detach from work.

Key findings of this study indicate that hours flown, years of service, employment during the pandemic, parenting young children, and lack of socialization with others on layovers are associated with higher burnout scores. Commuting, relationships, and seniority are not as associated with burnout as hypothesized but they are indicative of lower psychological detachment scores and lower quality of life scores.

Unexpected findings in this study relate to changes in company culture at Southwest Airlines indicating higher burnout levels amongst senior flight attendants. Additionally, a previously unmentioned question on the survey relates to flight attendant trust in management. A small number responded positively to feeling comfortable approaching management during times of personal struggles and crises. My research indicates a significant correlation between trust and lower burnout scores ($r(9)=-0.281$,

p=0.002). This surprising finding could be impactful for management in recognizing that longstanding family-like values at Southwest Airlines are dissipating.

This study extends our understanding of Social Capital Theory, specifically bonding social capital, as a protective factor in preventing burnout. When flight attendants at Southwest Airlines feel inclined to spend time with their coworkers, they are less impacted by the emotional labor of the job and subsequently experience lower levels of burnout. Our understanding of Conservation of Resources is also supported as this research indicates that flight attendants who indicated spending less time on schedule manipulation also had lower burnout scores, higher psychological detachment scores, and quality of life scores. Additionally, use of Conservation of Resources theory is supported in this research when examining the higher levels of burnout amongst flight attendants who have the responsibility of parenting young and teenage children.

Implications

This study has implications that are important for the consideration of Southwest Airlines Flight Attendant management and union leaders. This study indicates that stronger relationships between crew members create better work environments decreasing burnout levels as well as indicating higher quality of life for employees. Other important implications indicate that working higher amounts of hours, combined with longer years of service can increase burnout levels. The implication of the lasting impact of pandemic induced burnout amongst this workgroup can open an opportunity for leaders to investigate additional factors that might be affecting higher scores for those who were employed during 2020-2021 versus those who were not.

Recommendations for future studies

For future studies, researchers should expand on the current study by examining a larger group of participants, as well as collecting qualitative data responses from specific subgroups. It would be beneficial for researchers to include questions related to finances, diet, exercise, and lifestyle including drinking and sleeping habits to have a better picture of what kind of factors might be indicators of lower burnout scores aside from those assessed in this study's survey.

Additionally, crewmembers share daily on social media sites about being affected by factors not examined in this study, including inflation, delays in contract renewal, union dissatisfaction, company challenges, disagreements about progressive politics, and growing company technological difficulties. Due to the timing of this research, it is possible that burnout assessment scores were influenced by each of these factors as well and other recent company issues not reflected in this study.

LIMITATIONS

Southwest Airlines currently has nearly 20,000 flight attendants. Although participants for this study represent an equal portion of flight attendants from each domicile, as well as varying age groups, seniority groups, and other demographic factors, the largest limitation of this study is the small sample size. Also, the non-random convenience sampling does not allow for representation of participants who might not have had access to the survey. Additionally, a delay in survey distribution prevented collection of a larger number of participants. One important missing inquiry from the survey that I intended to collect when I started this project was related to flight attendant physical health and well-being. Missing questions related to exercise and diet were meant to be included as assessments of the conservation of resources for this workgroup.

CONCLUSION

Southwest Airlines has been known for more than 50 years as a supportive environment for employees with an enriching company culture, wonderful customer interactions, and promising careers of longevity for flight attendants. This study highlights how the pandemic impacted senior flight attendants at Southwest Airlines, whether they were flying or at home. It is possible that impacts of pandemic related burnout are still affecting participants, creating higher levels of burnout reflected here. Additionally, this research indicates that flight attendants with longer careers are experiencing higher levels of burnout, which could indicate an evolutionary shift in the company culture at Southwest. Another investigative study on this workgroup and their feelings surrounding company culture is relevant following the information generated by this research.

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TABLES

Table 1. Seniority

Pearson's Correlations

| Variable | | yrs2 | BATTOT | dettot | QOL |
|-----------|-------------|--------|--------|--------|-----|
| 1. yrs2 | Pearson's r | — | | | |
| | p-value | — | | | |
| 2. BATTOT | Pearson's r | -0.202 | — | | |
| | p-value | 0.030 | — | | |
| 3. dettot | Pearson's r | -0.010 | 0.556 | — | |
| | p-value | 0.916 | < .001 | — | |
| 4. QOL | Pearson's r | -0.039 | -0.328 | -0.282 | — |
| | p-value | 0.681 | < .001 | 0.002 | — |

Table 2. Hours of Flying

Pearson's Correlations

| Variable | | trips2 | BATTOT | dettot | QOL |
|-----------|-------------|--------|--------|--------|-----|
| 1. trips2 | Pearson's r | — | | | |
| | p-value | — | | | |
| 2. BATTOT | Pearson's r | 0.163 | — | | |
| | p-value | 0.080 | — | | |
| 3. dettot | Pearson's r | 0.232 | 0.556 | — | |
| | p-value | 0.012 | < .001 | — | |
| 4. QOL | Pearson's r | -0.226 | -0.328 | -0.282 | — |
| | p-value | 0.015 | < .001 | 0.002 | — |

Table 3. Burnout and Pandemic Flying

Pearson's Correlations

| Variable | | BATTOT | panfly2 | panfly3 |
|------------|-------------|--------|---------|---------|
| 1. BATTOT | Pearson's r | — | | |
| | p-value | — | | |
| 2. panfly2 | Pearson's r | 0.080 | — | |
| | p-value | 0.392 | — | |
| 3. panfly3 | Pearson's r | -0.217 | -0.501 | — |
| | p-value | 0.019 | < .001 | — |

Table 4. Home Life

| Pearson's Correlations | | kids2 | BATTOT | dettot | QOL |
|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| Variable | | | | | |
| 1. kids2 | Pearson's r | — | | | |
| | p-value | — | | | |
| 2. BATTOT | Pearson's r | 0.204 | — | | |
| | p-value | 0.028 | — | | |
| 3. dettot | Pearson's r | 0.165 | 0.556 | — | |
| | p-value | 0.077 | < .001 | — | |
| 4. QOL | Pearson's r | 0.107 | -0.328 | -0.282 | — |
| | p-value | 0.253 | < .001 | 0.002 | — |

Table 5. Other Relationships

| Pearson's Correlations | | cohear2 | ron2 | oowc2 | BATTOT | dettot | QOL |
|-------------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| Variable | | | | | | | |
| 1. cohear2 | Pearson's r | — | | | | | |
| | p-value | — | | | | | |
| 2. ron2 | Pearson's r | -0.030 | — | | | | |
| | p-value | 0.750 | — | | | | |
| 3. oowc2 | Pearson's r | 0.167 | -0.114 | — | | | |
| | p-value | 0.073 | 0.223 | — | | | |
| 4. BATTOT | Pearson's r | 0.224 | -0.304 | 0.187 | — | | |
| | p-value | 0.016 | < .001 | 0.045 | — | | |
| 5. dettot | Pearson's r | 0.021 | -0.088 | 0.087 | 0.556 | — | |
| | p-value | 0.824 | 0.346 | 0.352 | < .001 | — | |
| 6. QOL | Pearson's r | -0.096 | 0.202 | -0.219 | -0.328 | -0.282 | — |
| | p-value | 0.307 | 0.029 | 0.018 | < .001 | 0.002 | — |

Table 6. Commuting

Pearson's Correlations

| Variable | com2 BATTOT dettot QOL | | | |
|-----------|------------------------|-------|--------|--------|
| 1. com2 | Pearson's r | — | | |
| | p-value | — | | |
| 2. BATTOT | Pearson's r | 0.016 | — | |
| | p-value | 0.862 | — | |
| 3. dettot | Pearson's r | 0.184 | 0.556 | — |
| | p-value | 0.048 | < .001 | — |
| 4. QOL | Pearson's r | 0.034 | -0.328 | -0.282 |
| | p-value | 0.718 | < .001 | 0.002 |