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# Working the skies: Changing representations of gendered work in the airline industry, 1930–2011

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### Abstract

The influence of the media, whether print, celluloid or contemporary electronic, on life and career choices, particularly from a gender perspective is well documented. Indeed, the power of today's e-media imagery has, arguably, a more ubiquitous influence on such decisions than was in the case for previous generations. However, both traditional print and more contemporary media influencers remain important and, therefore, gaining an understanding of their role in the representation of gendered work, both historically and in a modern context, is of considerable value. Working in the sky, whether as a pilot or member of the cabin crew, continues to hold a fascination and attraction for potential entrants that far exceeds the technical demands or financial rewards of the reality of such work. Perceived as "glamorous" work since the early days of commercial flight in the 1930s, this tag has largely remained, despite major changes to the business and

workplace environment in the intervening years. Commercial aviation is an area of work that has inspired a genre of influential romantic literature and numerous "real-life" recollections alongside serious academic analysis. This paper charts the representation of, in particular, female flight attendant work from its "golden era" through to the present context where the influence of the low-cost airline model has radically impacted upon the working environment within the sector. The discussion focuses on the broad "genre" of airline-related employment literature, drawing on romantic, comic and biographical accounts alongside sources that address this theme from academic/research perspectives, in order to ask whether contemporary representation is any more a true reflection of this work than that during previous generations. In undertaking this analysis, this paper draws upon the role and career representation literature, particularly with respect to embodied and gendered work.

## Highlights

- ° Analyses airline work from varied sources to assess how these impact on images of female flight attendants.
- ° Links changing perceptions of work to political and organisational change.
- ° Recognises the changing role of media as career influencers in relation to airline work.



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## Keywords

Flight attendant; Airlines; Employment; Role representation; Career representation; Gendered work

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