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Gendered Instagram representations in the aviation industry

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ABSTRACT

Air transport and tourism are interdependent systems wherein idealized gender performances are shaped by organizational cultures and particular commercial interests that have implications for gendered representations. Organizations use social media spaces to influence public perceptions, yet in doing so they may (re)construct hegemonic notions pertaining to images of masculinity and femininity. This paper utilizes a feminist post-structuralist approach to deconstruct normative gendered assumptions that exist within the aviation sector's use of Instagram. Netnography is used to uncover the dominant discourses, as well as the complex representations of gender as represented by airlines on Instagram. Findings reveal that despite a minority of images that defy stereotypes, the airlines consistently construct and distribute playful imagery that objectifies female staff and hyper-feminizes the cabin space. In uncovering how airline organizational images may portray employees in gendered ways, this paper contributes to the achievement of SDG 5 i.e. gender equality in tourism. The paper recommends that the industry incorporates more diverse performances across all aviation occupational roles so that images that challenge stereotypes become part of the everyday.

Introduction

Air transport is a primary mode of travel and enables global networks, supporting the development of destinations and tourism markets (Lohmann & Duval, 2015; Spasojevic et al., 2018). It is therefore a fundamental part of the tourism industry (Papatheodorou, 2021). Tourism is a highly gendered industry, characterized by a high number of women in lower level positions (Ram, 2019). A large body of literature has investigated women's positioning in the tourism industry (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Khan, 2009; Pritchard, 2001; Ram, 2018), offering increased empirical knowledge about gendered practices and norms. Despite its relevance from an economic and cultural perspective, only a limited body of research is concerned with airlines. Aviation is traditionally segregated by the male-dominated flight deck and overwhelmingly female cabin crew (Baum, 2012). Other ways that demonstrate the gendered structure of the industry include first-class/luxury usage (Hwang & Lyu, 2018) and lack of industry attention to social issues such as climate change, an issue more likely to be supported by women who generally show increased environmental awareness (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Hwang & Choi, 2018).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a 2030 agenda with the overarching principle of 'leaving no one behind', may be used to address the unequal distribution of gender in tourism and its associated sectors. Tourism plays an essential role in fulfilling the commitments of the 2030 agenda, including its commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women (SDG 5) (UNWTO n.d.). Thus, SDG 5 is a central component of attaining sustainable development in tourism (Boluk et al., 2019; Moreno Alarcón & Cole, 2019) and sets out to eliminate harmful practices and ensure women's full participation (UNWTO n.d.). Though progress has undoubtedly been made in some tourism and transport areas (i.e. IATA's 25by2025), the advancement of gender equality remains gradual (UN 2020).

Gender is shaped and reproduced within aviation and tourism through media imagery, i.e. television, advertisements and social media (Pritchard, 2001; Kling et al., 2020). Media is a global power that plays a crucial role in transmitting information that reflects society, as well as shaping and constructing it. It plays a significant part in communicating messages that construct dominant ideologies of gender and perpetuate unrealistic perceptions (Lemish, 2008). Early research in media studies, which focused on depictions of 'men' and 'women' in Western, mainstream, 'traditional' media (i.e. television and advertisements), noted that, when portrayed, men and women were heavily stereotyped manifesting certain heteronormative traits (Collins, 2011; Gauntlett, 2002). Heteronormative representations of images of masculinity and femininity play a constitutive role in the materialization of gender and the construction of public beliefs (Happer & Philo, 2013), as well as in the structure of gender roles that reinforce assumed gender differences and expectations (Ellemers, 2018).

The internet is a space that offers multiple affordances that both liberate gendered behaviors and encourage the enactment of traditional gender roles. Instagram is of particular interest in making sense of online gendered performances because it is an image-based platform offering a visual perspective through photographs or videos (Åberg et al., 2020). Reaching approximately one billion monthly active users as of 2019 (Volo & Irimiás, 2020), Instagram enables the sharing of everyday narratives through imagery of 'personal' life, generating feelings of enhanced intimacy and connectedness (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Thus, as an area of research, Instagram is gaining considerable scholarly attention within the social sciences (c.f. Calderia et al., 2018).

Airline organizations are increasingly utilizing Instagram, and social media more broadly, as powerful marketing tools because they offer vast possibilities for direct communication, thereby enabling sociability and intimate communication between organizations and consumers (Knoblich et al., 2017). As representations on Instagram actively (re)create specific gender conceptions linked to broader socio-cultural discourses (Calderia et al., 2018), it should be noted that airlines' portrayals of gender are often shaped by particular commercial interests that may have implications for gendered representations of their workforce.

Much of the literature on the representation of gender in airlines has focused on promotional material through more 'traditional' media channels (Baum, 2012; Duffy et al., 2017). Though this approach has progressed the study of gender, notably lacking is a focus on promotion through social media, which is more intimate and everyday. Organizational Instagram images are often presented alongside other everyday imagery posted by individual users, which makes it challenging to decipher why and by whom these images are being presented. It is thus important to analyze the role of organizations' gendered constructions through these sites to identify how expectations of particular aviation careers are shaped (Baum, 2012). The influence of social media in determining how we understand aviation as a career and how these roles are perceived may provide further insight into the normative reproductions that contribute to the construction of gendered discourses that remain deeply embedded in aviation culture.

This paper aims to uncover how airline organizational images may portray employees in gendered ways through Instagram across four airlines – Emirates, KLM, Qantas and Virgin Atlantic. It charts the organizational representation of flight attendants and pilots on Instagram to understand the complexities of gendered performance and representation. In bringing deeper

understandings of the gendered dimensions of airline organizational social media posts, the paper contributes to breaking down gender binaries by opening up representations regarding what airline positions look like and who can perform them, generating fairer discourses regarding who undertakes what roles. Using a feminist poststructuralist approach to deconstruct the certainty of the gender binary, this paper seeks to understand the social processes through which dominant discourses of gender are constructed (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1996). Feminist poststructuralism, as a tool of analysis, can help discern how imagery constitutes gendered meanings and identities in aviation organizations. Netnography, a naturalistic tool of investigation exploring naturally occurring online cultures and practices (Kozinets et al., 2014), is used as a collection tool to understand the dominant discourses and the complex representations of gender in aviation.

The following sections offer a review of existing media and communications literature on gender as well as social media, before turning, more specifically, to the gendering of work in the aviation industry. The methodology is then detailed, outlining how the paper's empirics were derived through a netnographic analysis that sought to understand the representation of gender in aviation. The primary findings and analysis are then presented before offering a concluding discussion of how this research contributes to existing conceptualizations of the representation of gender and its practical implications in aviation.

Theoretical background

The evolving image of gender roles in media

The foundational idea of gender theory is that women and men are categorized based on their biological difference. The categories of 'man' and 'woman' mandate actions and behavior routinely reinforced through daily experiences (Butler, 2011). This fundamental idea between assumed gender differences creates a false binary of gender essentialism; the belief that there are essential characteristics (properties) that are necessary to being a woman, which differ from those essential to a man (Stone, 2004). These ideas have been critiqued by the reconceptualization of gender as constructed rather than a natural given. Gender constructs are used to reinforce assumed gender differences, the result of which naturalizes particular ways of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This creates the assumption that biological characteristics determine 'male' and 'female' categories, setting behavioral expectations that mirror dominant attitudes held in societies. Deconstructing the gender binary is essential in order to reconstruct certain naturalized gender assumptions.

A central mechanism in constructing our understanding of gender are the images used in 'traditional' media (i.e. television and print), and more recently, social media (Lemish, 2008). 'Traditional' media provides structured interpretations of reality that reflect dominant attitudes held in societies (Tuchman, 2000). The earliest media research on gender investigated medias' role in arranging men and women into gender roles based on their sex (Gill, 2007; Wood, 1994). Early studies into media depictions of women revealed a prevalence of portrayals, including weak, 'token' females (Friedan, 1963). Male characters, by contrast, were predominantly symbolized as assertive and superior (Gauntlett, 2002). The chronic under- and misrepresentation of females, Wood (1994) argued, falsely implies that males are the cultural standard, and females are insignificant (O'Neill & Mulready, 2015). Portraying males and females based on biological differences represents a stereotype that sustains socially endorsed views of gender and the traditional roles each gender ought to perform (Mikkola, 2011). Acting as agents of socialization, media, through its representations, inform 'audiences' which gender roles and types of gendered behaviors are deemed most appropriate and socially valuable (Collins, 2011; Happer & Philo, 2013).

Since viewing female and male sex roles as constructed forms of femininity and masculinity, major strands of research in media and cultural studies have explored gender across multiple

forms of media. Focus has for example been on representation (Gutierrez et al., 2020), absence (Klein & Shiffman, 2009), behavior (Kimbrough et al., 2013), and the 'pornification' of women, that is, the everyday erotic depictions of females as sexually subordinate (Oppliger, 2008). Tuchman (2000), defined the pervasive under- and misrepresentation of females and other marginalized groups as 'symbolic annihilation', a process by which mass media outlets – television and magazines - trivialize women and other marginalized groups as not socially valued. In doing so, the media sends symbolic messages about women's societal value and what it means to be female.

Within the past few years, however, several attempts have been made to enact change in the portrayals of gender in the media with mainstream advertising becoming more 'diverse' in terms of the representation of body sizes and racial backgrounds (Diedrichs & Lee, 2011). Diverse representations in media can assist in breaking down specific ideologies and challenge gendered discourses through deliberate online hypersexualized performances (Hunter & Cuenca, 2017). While visual-based social media platforms like Instagram are typically viewed as spaces with increased pressures over visual display and normalized hypersexualized discourse (Ringrose, 2011), individual accounts are both reconfiguring ideas of hyper-femininity and stereotypical representations, thereby bringing into question what it means to be, and who is allowed to be, hypersexualized.

The use of social networking sites (SNSs) is also thoroughly embedded in organizational practices. SNSs are platforms in which organizations can market products and services quickly, increase awareness of the organizations and, most importantly, construct more favorable brand perception. Further, SNS content, compared to 'traditional' media, is a more effective and highly-targeted visual advertising channel in which organizations can engage with customers. While images are effective tools in which to promote a desired organizational narrative, the images shared via social media, may further contribute to an ideologized, and often unrealistic, image of the body. Consequently, organizations on Instagram must be viewed as key players in the social media system, as they co-construct our understandings of gender.

Aviation and the visual representation of gender roles in media

Until recently, the images of transport workers (i.e. pilots and engineers) have overwhelmingly been of men (APEC, 2015). One notable exception is the image of the flight attendant. The history of the flight attendant is one of commoditization and commercialization of services deemed feminine (Hanlon, 2017). Due to initial reservations in the safety of commercial air travel in the 1930s, flight attendants who acquired formal training as nurse practitioners were mostly employed to attend to the 'care' of passengers (Huang, 2011). Typically referred to as the 'wife' or 'sweetheart' of the successful, air-traveling businessman, the images drew on domesticity and assumed femininity as a way to promote a sense of safety in the cabin (Hanlon, 2017). The female flight attendant replaced the male flight attendant, formerly known as stewards and cabin boys, who previously dominated the cabin space as early as the 1920s (Tiemeyer, 2013). The female flight attendant's function, in the 1930s, was entirely constructed as an extension of her gender and sexuality, and her identity as a woman became paramount to her role as a worker (Vantoch, 2013).

Aviation promotional material, during the time, was predominantly designed to target the male travel public, generally evoking a masculine connotation of technology and professionalism; characteristics typically describing the captain, the businessman and the male tourist (Ortlepp, 2007). Unlike the domesticated cabin, the 'handsome', 'white' middle-aged male captain, offered heteronormative representations of masculinity. Featured as the airlines' most valuable asset, captains were viewed as knowledgeable professionals whose role signaled prestige and commanded respect (Ortlepp, 2007). Aviation is an industry dominated by men and informed by occupational stereotypes (e.g. physical strengths and cognitive ability) (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Uzunogullari & Brown, 2020). This creates several challenges that prevent women from entering the flight deck (McCarthy et al., 2015; Yanıkoğlu et al., 2020). A recent study (Yanıkoğlu

et al., 2020) on gender-related career challenges experienced by female pilots in Turkey revealed that while the number of female commercial pilots in aviation has increased, women still face gender prejudice in an industry that follows dominant masculine discourses.

Technological advancements within the aviation industry in the 1950s led to an increase in competition as many new carriers entered the market. To gain a competitive edge, airlines began promoting their services and the bodies that delivered them, moving from promoting safety to promoting sex (Hanlon, 2017). Airlines, such as United, worked tirelessly towards promoting the image of the glamourous flight attendant which was attained through extensive training facilities known as 'charm farms' (Barry, 2007), where training on figure improvement and grooming was within the standard curriculum. The liberal use of female flight attendants as a promotional tool further strengthened the gender binary and solidified the restrictive vision of femininity, elements of which many airlines continue to exploit today (Duffy et al., 2017).

Between the 1960s–1970s, airline marketers, due to the growing number of male executives, deliberately used ambiguous messages in advertisements that attempted to sexualize the female flight attendant and their service (e.g. National Airlines 'Fly Me' campaign) (Rajé, 2017). Inciting the erotic imagination of the air-traveling businessmen, the public image created by the airline industry exploited the female body, solely depicting her as a sex object (Huang, 2011). Focusing primarily on the media representations of women through non-academic airline-related employment literature (e.g. novels and biographies), Baum (2012) identified the extent to which corporate marketing material, shaped by gender, construct particular expectations of cabin crew work. Extending Baum's (2012) work on gender representations in aviation within traditional media, through our focus on social media, this paper acknowledges the disparity in portrayals of females in aviation. It extends these discussions by focusing on the everydayness of Instagram, and how organizational imagery, presented alongside other everyday images posted by individual users, become mixed up and almost unidentifiable as advertisements.

In the late twentieth century, the move to end federal control of airline routes and fares, known as deregulation, heavily influenced the structure of the aviation industry which suddenly experienced substantial growth in the rise of low-cost carriers (LCCs) (Barry, 2007), moving further away from the once guaranteed 1930s glamour of commercial air travel (Ortlepp, 2007). Nonetheless, continued portrayals of overtly sexualized women working in the airline industry, both in media and popular culture, persist ensuring that sexualization and the myth of glamorous work remain in the popular consciousness (Duffy et al., 2017). Discriminatory practices and lack of diversity are not limited to gender but include other forms of systematic stereotyping such as ageism (Bergman & Gillberg, 2015) and race (Evans, 2013; Tiemeyer, 2013). Simpson (2014) argues that the specific and temporal characteristics (i.e. gender, age, race and sexuality) of the work and its performance may cause difficulties in airline workers managing and negotiating normative identities. To provide real opportunities for destabilizing stereotypical portrayals, airlines need to consider much more than just gender in reflecting on their representations. Creating diverse narratives involves the integration of alternative representations that disrupt hegemonic norms and performances.

By combining emerging scholarship and building on the previously well-established discussions of gender in media cultures, this paper explores the display of gendered performances in airline organizations through their Instagram representations. The paper charts the organizational representation of flight attendants and pilots on Instagram to understand the complexities of gender performance and representation, and it contributes to the deconstruction of certain naturalized assumptions of gender that exist within the aviation sector.

Methodology

A feminist poststructuralist approach was used to provide a critical understanding of gendered representations in aviation, embracing an alternative 'messy' reality in the digital world. Adopting a feminist poststructuralist approach is the most appropriate tradition in studying gendered

discursive environments because it avoids any claims towards quantified, essentialized and universalized facts. Instead, it seeks insight into the contradictory ways gender is presented within and across the four airlines. By framing this paper through the feminist poststructural lens, the researcher examines the values and practices that contribute to the social construction of gender through aviation.

Shaping this feminist-led research is the lead researcher's reflection on her positionality throughout the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Focus is here with the lead author because they were responsible for undertaking data collection and analysis. Positionality, in the context of this paper, thus refers to the lead author's belief systems and philosophical perspectives (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2006). Conveying positionality relative to the research orientation is crucial in demonstrating the way in which the lead author constructs the world and makes meaning of it in ways that influence the research process (Berger, 2013). The lead author is a mixed-raced female doctoral student who was raised in a largely conservative religion that values traditional gender roles.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the complex social media representations of gender in aviation, this paper used netnography; a method that positions itself firmly in the socio-technical context in which the phenomena exists (Kozinets, 2012). As a research method, netnography, an online ethnography approach for conducting ethnographic studies, is used in the investigation of naturally occurring online cultures (Kozinets, 2012). The value of online imagery as symbols in today's environment of digitalization is emphasized through the netnographic approach. Capturing images through a netnographic inquiry concerns the cultural context, visual elements and multidimensional symbols which contribute to the online narratives (Kozinets, 2015), offering a direct window into the social world of airline communities. Through the netnographic inquiry, this research explores the nuanced and complex narratives in social media imagery.

Social media content is dynamic, and the images, as a means of communication, present a unique research opportunity, due to the additional layer of meaning which may draw out deeper significance and create new knowledge (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). Scarles's (2010) work emphasizes the importance of utilizing alternative methods to transcend the limitations of verbal discourse. Investigating visuals in tourism, Scarles (2014) argued, may be advantageous in creating a deeper significance of culture as a phenomenon. Visuals may be viewed as symbolic manifestations of communities related to gender that would otherwise be more challenging to obtain via traditional methods (e.g. interviews) (Alcadipani & Tonelli, 2014). Thus, as a visual data source, Instagram offers a potentially valuable research environment (Volo & Irimiás, 2020).

Instagram is an 'image-machine' that stimulates the production and distribution of content (Carah & Shaul, 2016). For organizations, Instagram is perceived as a highly targeted visual advertising channel, which allows businesses to visually communicate their brand identity to users. Structurally, Instagram is asymmetric by design, meaning the 'follower' relationship between users is nonreciprocal. Users of the platform can also curate their followers in a way that, to some extent, influences the images they encounter. Another element which influences the visibility of content is the Instagram algorithm introduced in 2016, which dictates the sequence of posts (Cotter, 2019), whereby the algorithm may show a bias in favor of organizational images, over those of individual users. Instagram was chosen for this study for two main reasons. The first concerns the centrality of images that may provide further insight into the ways in which gender is embedded in the aviation discourse and discursive practices within which ideas of performance and representations of gender are produced. The second reason is Instagram's rapid growth and general popularity, becoming one of the fastest growing SNSs (Zappavigna, 2016).

This study was based on purposive selection; a non-probability sampling technique (Patton, 2002), of four airline organizations on Instagram – Emirates, KLM, Qantas and Virgin Atlantic. At Emirates, women constitute around 40% of the total workforce, the majority of whom work

as cabin crew (Emirates, 2020). The airline remains strongly gender-segregated with only 2.25% of females employed as pilots (ISWAP, 2020). Virgin Atlantic offers marginally improved figures. Approximately 3.21% of women at Virgin Atlantic hold positions as pilots (ISWAP, 2020). Latest available data on the total number of cabin crew working for Virgin Atlantic in 2015 is 4,118, 77.8% of whom are female (Statista, 2015). Recent data of the distribution of women at KLM is 4.83% as pilots (ISWAP, 2020) and 86% cabin crew (Air France-KLM, 2011), also demonstrating a strongly gender-segregated workforce. Finally, at Qantas 5.68% of females are employed as pilots, marginally surpassing the global average of 5.26% (ISWAP, 2020).

The selection of airlines was based on the judgement of the research team regarding Instagram follower count, which determines the level of reach of the posted content, geographical spread, brand image, business models, and gender distributions. As illustrated in Table 1, the four selected airlines are actively contributing to the visual landscape by sharing curated posts on Instagram to millions of followers.

Typical followers identified across the selected airlines include a wide mix of users such as aviation employees, celebrities, as well as everyday users who represent no affiliation with the airline industry. Also noted are the significantly low numbers of users airlines follow on Instagram. The difference in 'following' suggests that Emirates and KLM have a more passive relationship with their audiences, indicating the adaptation of a 'traditional' approach to advertising. A review of followers shows that Emirates primarily follows sporting profiles (e.g. realmadrid) and KLM a mixture of celebrities (e.g. @nikkitutorial), crew appreciation accounts (e.g. @crewklm) and airlines (e.g. @ethiadairways). Virgin Atlantic and Qantas, by contrast, reveals a variety of followed accounts including airline employees, celebrity accounts (e.g. @theellenshow), DMOs and travel agencies (e.g. @tripadvisor), brands (e.g. Under Armour), and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ+) charities (e.g. @ManchesterPride), implying sociability and intimate communication between organizations and consumers. The differences in the types of accounts followed by the airlines individually may suggest that organizations make informed and purposeful selections in the management of followers.

Data collection & analysis

The data gathering process used two netnographic data retrieval techniques: (1) archival data, a method of directly copying content, in this case, Instagram posts, from the observed online community and (2) field note data, a technique based on the researcher's own observation of an online community (Kozinets, 2012).

This study used purposive sampling in selecting images posted by the airlines for analysis -chosen posts were those featuring the presentation of airline employees performing the roles of cabin crew and pilot. Images that did not include people (i.e. destinations and aircraft) were excluded. There was significant variation in the total number of posts shared across the selected airlines as each joined the platform at different times. November 5th 2013 was selected as the starting point for data collection as this was the first point at which each airline held an active Instagram account. The sampling timeframe continued until March 12th 2020, with the data collected during a dedicated three-day period in mid- March 2020, just before the COVID-19

Table 1. Airline Instagram presence.

Airlines	Followers	Following	Number of posts
@emirates	5.2m*	20	1630
@klm	1.3m	49	1872
@qantas	971k**	1140	2373
@virginatlantic	535k	427	1057
Figures based on data collected on 02/03/20			
*million.			
**thousand.			

pandemic largely grounded airlines. The analysis focused solely on imagery which, as symbolic manifestations of communities, may provide a deeper understanding of culture. It excluded text/captions which, as narrative agents, inform the consumer of a particular story (Bal, 2009). Following the established framework for selection criteria, the study collected a total of 1,385 images, including 513 from Emirates, 323 from KLM, 271 from Qantas, and 278 from Virgin Atlantic. The Instagram images presented in this paper, due to the General Data Protection Regulation which prohibits the reproduction of images, follows Pearce and Wang (2019) method by using custom illustrations without attention to faces, focusing primarily on body position, poses, appearance and gender.

The data was analyzed through interpretive thematic analysis, a method for systematically identifying and reporting patterns (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interpretive thematic analysis is concerned with the underlying, recurrent themes in the data set that may be more nuanced in the underlying reality of a social situation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis involved (1) data familiarization through reading and re-reading airline Instagram imagery and noting down initial ideas surrounding the performance and representation of gender and (2) generating initial codes by reporting features of the data that presented dominant discourses, and collating data relevant to each code, (3) searching for primary themes of complex practices and representations of gender and collating codes into core themes, (4) reviewing themes and sub-themes in relation to the coded images, and finally (5) defining specific themes and selecting illustrative extracts for each theme. The analysis was guided by the feminist poststructuralist and aviation literature (e.g. Baum, 2012; Goffman, 1979) as well as the Instagram images. The writing up and discussion of major themes were discussed by the research team. This study identified three themes that structure the findings and discussion that follows: 'gendered embodiment and display', 'gendered organizational spaces', and 'challenging gender-based occupational stereotypes'.

Findings and discussion

Gendered embodiment and display

Embodiment and bodily display are mechanisms driving gender stratification. Mears and Connell (2016) first introduced concepts of display work as a way to define labor that involves a high degree of bodily display, ranging from overtly sexualized (e.g. sex work) to professionalized bodies (e.g. retail). Much like emotional labor, bodily display is considered an important part of most labor roles, particularly in service-based industries (Hochschild, 1983). Several images related to the presentation of bodies were noted across all four airlines.

Female flight attendants, unlike male or female pilots, across the selected airlines are routinely staged in environments (i.e. events and destinations) that extend the traditional workplace (i.e. the cabin). This is most evident at Emirates and Virgin Atlantic. An example of an image is a post of a group of 'young', 'slim' and well-groomed female Emirates flight attendants at the Dubai golf tournament. In this image, female bodies are used to 'window dress', that is, emphasize or place social weight (i.e. power and authority) between the females and the male figure (Goffman, 1979) (Figure 1). The positioning of female bodies in this manner may be related to cultural dimensions that value the broader subordinate positions of women, in this case their submissive feminine performance, thereby reflecting the position of women in UAE. The habitual showcasing of 'white' Western women may also be viewed as a way of shielding Emirati women as prescribed by Islamic culture (Obeidat, 2002). The sheer volume of 232 images related to gendered embodiment and display and visibility of predominately 'white' and Western female bodies produced by Emirates implies that Western female bodies are routinely repurposed as material signifiers. The purposeful staging and placing of worker bodies reflects earlier airline marketing strategies that exploited the female body, solely depicting 'her' as a product (Huang,

Figure 1. Emirates flight attendants 'staged and placed' at golf tournament (Instagram 2013).

2011). Further, the use of images of 'white' Western women may be viewed as a way in which the airline seeks to promote its cosmopolitan image that reflects the romanticized Western golden age of travel (Lee, 2018).

KLM and Qantas, by contrast, offered a combined total of 24 images that depicted the staging of the female body as an aesthetic promotional tool, and instead were more likely to display more subtle, yet deliberate, poses and positions of the body. In a series of images, both male and female flight attendants are displayed in poses that appear to remove them psychologically from the social situation. Goffman (1979) defines this performance of the body as *licensed withdrawal*. One example of these types of portrayals is an image of an 'attractive', 'young' female KLM flight attendant who withdraws 'her' gaze from the social situation (Figure 2). This act leaves 'her' unoriented, not being a fully active participant of the narrative (Goffman, 1979). These displays of the body matter as they reproduce the image of women as vulnerable and lacking agency (Jhally, 2009), a practice not mirrored in the display of the assertive pilot.

Another example of images relevant to this theme is the presentation of fragmented female body parts. Here the body is displayed as parts that are disconnected from the whole (Ross & Byerly, 2004). In separating the body from the 'woman', Bartky (1990) argues that this fragmentation serves to objectify women. By dissecting the female body, women are not fully acknowledged for their mind and ability (Papadaki, 2010). Body fragmentation, also referred to as the *feminine touch* (Goffman, 1979), continues in representations of womens' fingers, hands, face, legs, feet, chest and shoulders, which are individual parts to be manipulated and commodified.

The many possibilities in which to exploit the dismantled body are most clearly presented in the 24 images shared by Virgin Atlantic. One example that illustrates this is an image of a 'slim', 'white' female flight attendant as she poses using her torso, manicured fingers and hands to present an alcoholic beverage (Figure 3). Here, the feminine body is associated with and constructed by the product (Rocha, 2013). This type of touch, use of female body parts and focus on the torso may encourage the idea that women are sexually available. It may also facilitate the tendency to evaluate women and the female body on the basis of their

Figure 2. KLM flight attendant engaging in licenced withdrawal (Instagram 2018).

Figure 3. Virgin Atlantic flight attendant using torso, fingers and hands to present a product (Instagram 2018).

appearance. Thus, in disconnecting the feminine body, it becomes an object of consumption, a process through which parts of their identity is lost (Rocha, 2013). The emphasis on dress, appearance and bodily behavior is well established within the tourism industry which routinely enforces desired physical appearances and conforming behaviors as valuable characteristics (Uzunogullari & Brown, 2020).

It is worth noting that there are distinct differences in the representation of the pilot across the selected airlines. The overexploitation of the female body as a promotional tool, and dismissal of the pilot and male bodies, calls into question the placement of assumed social value. This may indicate that social value is based on both the occupational role and the gender that performs it. The representation of the body is of particular importance to gender studies as bodily display communicates the placement of status, power and social value (Goffman, 1979). This, in return, may influence public perceptions of the social status of such work and its workers. The recurrent positioning of predominantly 'attractive' and 'young' female flight attendants creates a deeper understanding of the representation of women and the work they perform in the airline industry.

Gender was a striking feature in this theme and was mostly realized through the use, or rather exploitation of, flight attendants as aesthetic symbols. The excessive use of female flight attendants was noted in around 1079 images. These types of images were the only ones that could be interpreted as showcasing female, and occasionally male, flight attendants in decorative roles, a common portrayal of women in tourism media (Khan, 2009). The occasional representation of male flight attendants mirrored the general distribution of gender in cabin crew work which typically favors female crew as a powerful aesthetic promotional tool. This is noted in the number of Instagram images portraying male flight attendants which featured in approximately 303 images, indicating that men take up a small proportion, demonstrating a strongly gendered-segregated workforce that reflects the prevailing distribution of gender in airline organizations.

When female bodies were displayed, they were often of 'white', 'slim', and what can be described as 'attractive' by Western standards. Previous research such as those by Baum (2012) and Duffy et al. (2017) has revealed the industry's habitual use of seemingly playful imagery that is based on the objectification of women, sexuality and the presentation of the feminine body as a marketable organizational subject. Findings suggest that whilst social media presents opportunities for alternative gendered displays, normative gendered constructions prevail within airline organizations' use of social media. Airlines have recently sought to promote gender equity and counter gender stereotypes, through means such as, the implementation of inclusive measures and showcasing of female role models in prestigious roles (i.e. pilot and leadership) as professional, skilled workers (Smith et al., 2021). However, the habitual showcasing of playful imagery that objectifies female staff and feminizes the cabin space contradicts recent claims made by airlines in their publicly available organizational documents, that they are actively trying to move away from such gendered constructions (Smith et al., 2021).

Gendered organizational spaces

Socially constructed gender ideologies that serve to maintain cultural and societal gender biases are maintained and reinforced in gendered organizational spaces. This theme exemplified strict gender role differentiation that were enacted and performed in particular organizational spaces (e.g. aircraft) and represented specific gendered stereotypes and archetypes of the masculine pilot and feminine flight attendant.

All airlines offered a number of flight attendant images performing distinctly feminine behaviors in particular organizational spaces (e.g. the cabin), a stage on which gendered performances are enacted. Both female and male flight attendants across the selected airlines are often

Figure 4. KLM flight attendant helping a passenger (Instagram 2017).

pictured performing their role as 'friendly', 'caring' and 'engaging' service providers, within the cabin space, terminal and gate vicinity. Figure 4 provides an example of this. It demonstrates a KLM female flight attendant assisting a customer in the airport terminal. 'She' is pictured leaning in and being involved with the customer. Examples by Emirates, Qantas and Virgin Atlantic include similar portrayals by both male and female flight attendants such as serving and engaging with and embracing passengers both inside and outside the cabin. The recurrent display of these kinds of 'feminine' characteristics reaffirms the restrictive vision of femininity in the cabin.

The representation of gendered organizational spaces and feminized performance is also realized through the interaction between flight attendants and young children. A typical portrayal, most present at Emirates, KLM and Qantas, are the images of female flight attendants holding or cradling babies on board the aircraft. In an example of the feminized performance, a 'white', 'young' female Qantas flight attendant is pictured closely holding a baby on board (Figure 5). 'She' is smiling while looking directly into the camera. The performance of closeness and physical embrace is visibly feminine, reaffirming flight attendants' 'mothering' role (Lyth, 2009).

The nurturing role of the feminine flight attendant is also realized through the lack of representation of pilots with children. There were no images of pilots with children at Emirates and Virgin Atlantic. Qantas offered one image displaying a male pilot holding a baby and nine images of male pilots posing, engaging with or near young children. KLM shared a few posts of pilots posing with and holding young children. The only caveat is that these images offer a familial link, that is, they represent a parent and their child. Thus, being caring, friendly, and engaging with children across the airlines was presented as desirable flight attendant characteristics. The images mostly reflected 'feminine' qualities that emulate the role of the nurturer and mother (Barry, 2007; Lyth, 2009).

Virgin Atlantic flight attendants' engagement with children, by contrast, is relatively limited. Instead, both male and female flight attendants across all airlines are routinely pictured near the entrance of the aircraft or onboard lounge, often welcoming or awaiting passenger arrival. The images shared by Emirates and Qantas reflect respectability and professionalism through poses

Figure 5. Qantas flight attendant cradling a baby (Instagram 2017).

including: (1) one hand on or touching the hip, while all fingers are visible in front and (2) both hands clasped in front of the body. Welcoming posts by KLM and Virgin Atlantic share some similarities but differ in a number of important ways and may be interpreted as luring in passengers and inviting the male gaze. In one example, a normatively 'attractive' and 'white' female Virgin Atlantic flight attendant is seen posing at the entrance of the aircraft, emulating a demeanor that may be described as seductive and enticing (Figure 6). 'Her' red, tight uniform, when compared to the Qantas and KLM uniforms further emphasize the highly sexualized pose. 'Her' welcoming pose may invite a sexualized gaze, a display that is reminiscent of the sexualized airline advertisements that incited the erotic imagination of the air-traveling businessman in the early years of commercial passenger aviation (Hudson, 2013); a marketing strategy that promoted airline services by presenting the bodies that deliver them. Ram (2018, 2019) implies that such images have been associated with onboard harassment. It is therefore essential that organizations reflect on how they proceed in the representation of professional staff in gendered ways through their online platforms.

As briefly discussed above, another theme emerging across the selected airlines in relation to gendered organizational spaces is the aircraft and the varied ways in which the flight deck and cabin crew are pictured utilizing it. The distinctly different manner in which pilots and flight attendants are seen posing with the aircraft is noted across all four airlines. Figure 7 displays Emirates pilots in front of the aircraft. Their distinctive pose (i.e. legs apart and firmly placed on the ground), direct eye contact with the camera, dark uniform and the visibility of the aircraft in the background, communicate a message of power and agency. These characteristics are also noted in another common portrayal of pilots across the airlines, namely the presence of the pilot on the flight deck. An example of an image is a post of a male and female Virgin Atlantic pilot (Figure 8). In this image, pilots are pictured physically 'taking up' space, which may be interpreted as commanding the flight deck. Their presence in this technical space strengthens their position of power. The flight attendant, by contrast, is pictured more intimately with contact including kissing, embracing, touching or gazing at the aircraft. An image shared by KLM illustrates this performance (Figure 9). It portrays a 'slim' female KLM flight attendant kissing the 'nose' of the aircraft. 'Her' fingertips lightly rest on either side of the aircraft while

Figure 6. Virgin Atlantic flight attendant at the aircraft entrance (Instagram 2020).

Figure 7. Emirates pilots posing in front of the aircraft (Instagram 2019).

kicking back one leg, drawing attention to 'her' shapely figure. The aircraft fuselage, which resembles a phallic shape (Beaty, 2011), has been criticized as embodying phallic masculinity. Thus, taking on highly sexualized characteristics, the imagery creates a sexualized intimacy between the female flight attendants and the aircraft. The display of affection and intimacy
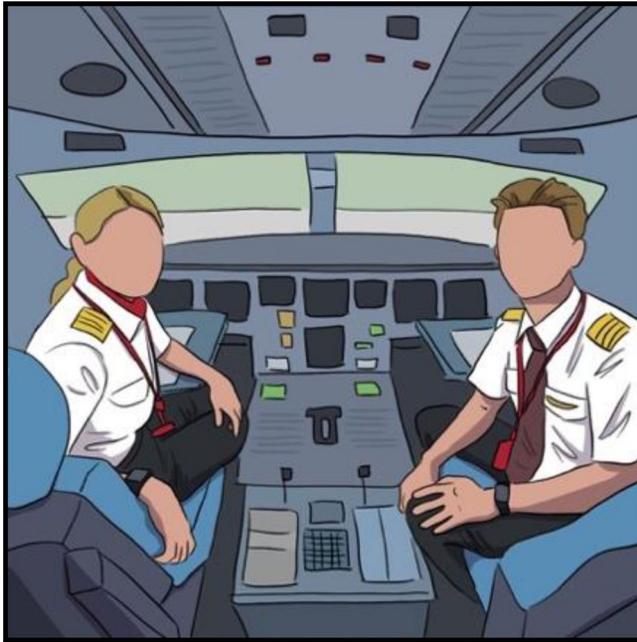
Figure 8. Virgin Atlantic pilots on the flight deck (Instagram 2019).

Figure 9. KLM flight attendant kissing the aircraft (Instagram 2017).

towards the aircraft is predominantly carried out by female flight attendants. Thus, the manner in which employees are positioned in relation to the aircraft, a shared space, is dependent on the occupational role which produces diverse meanings that work to further sustain gender stratification.

The representations from the cabin space across the airlines are visibly feminine and support the idea of the cabin as a largely 'feminine' space (Hochschild, 1983). This paper argues that the flight attendant image is influenced by societally approved performances and behaviors that are linked to broader socio-cultural discourses. While the flight attendant is portrayed fulfilling multiple aspects of their service role, the pilot, who is mostly depicted as 'male', is often limited to their responsibilities on the flight deck and rarely pictured in interactions with passengers. The pilot discourses suggest that unlike many of 'his' contemporaries, his position and power are indicated by his presence in technical spaces (i.e. flight deck). These types of representations very closely resemble the hegemonic gender norms that reflect popular media. The representations shared through Instagram posts by airlines may, therefore, be viewed as a way of 'doing gender', that is, they reproduce and reinforce hegemonic gender norms, stereotypes and performances. The following section, however, demonstrates that images across the four airlines are beginning to change the dominant narrative.

Challenging gender-based occupational stereotypes

Utilizing the binary of gender essentialism and biological differences as justification, gender stereotypes instruct individuals how to perform well in gendered domains (Ellemers, 2018). Imagery and inclusive messaging that disconfirm gender stereotypes may enhance understanding of bias and decrease the prevalence of stereotyping (Singh et al., 2020), which, in return, may work to destabilize societal gender ideologies, thereby enhancing opportunities for gender-related social change. All four airlines made attempts in bringing forward a more diverse representation of gender, by contesting established gender practices and performances through 158 (out of 1,385 total) images that offer an alternative 'messy' reality.

In this research, challenging gender-based occupational stereotypes refers to a variety of deliberate posts that could be viewed as ways to progress the representation of males and females in aviation. This theme is represented across the airlines in varying degrees. Qantas makes modest efforts toward presenting gender equality through dedicated posts that reference International Women's Day and feature an all-female flight crew. Most noteworthy is the featuring of the next generation of pilots and flight attendants. These images predominantly represent young children, adolescents and trainees either dressing up or performing specific skills that are typically associated with being a pilot or a flight attendant. Young girls are pictured in both the piloting role and the role of cabin crew. One example of this is an image of a male pilot adjusting the tie of a young girl wearing a pilots' uniform (Figure 10). A similar image posted by Virgin Atlantic, which can be interpreted as inspiring the next generation, is the depiction of a young girl performing a flight attendant's service role (Figure 11). Boys are generally shown as pilots and rarely depicted being encouraged to become cabin crew. The traditional portrayal of feminized performance is challenged by the presence of a male cabin crew member who is seen guiding the young individual.

This theme is also realized through the representation of female pilots performing their role on the flight deck. As stated earlier, the aircraft is a shared space, one that is used differently depending on the occupational role. In sharing an image of a female pilot, airlines are demonstrating that there is a place for females within the role of the pilot. An example of this representation may be found in a post shared by KLM (Figure 12). The image illustrates a 'young', 'white' female pilot on the flight deck. Her representation, when compared to men on the flight deck, is not dissimilar. Making direct contact with the camera, her positioning and use of the space demonstrates her active and in charge role. This image helps bring about a more equal representation of women in occupations that are currently gender-segregated (Singh et al., 2020). The image communicates a message of agency, a component that is absent in imagery where female employees are depicted in a vulnerable state (i.e. Figure 2). Presenting an array of men and women in different occupational roles on social media is an effective way to

Figure 10. Qantas pilot adjusting the tie of a young child (Instagram 2017).

Figure 11. Virgin Atlantic flight attendant guiding 'the next generation' (Instagram 2019).

encourage males and females to pursue a career in aviation at all organizational levels. A total of 61 images represented female pilots, including eight from Emirates and Virgin Atlantic, 16 from KLM and 29 from Qantas. When compared to the 218 images featuring male pilots, this indicates further progress may be required to advance SDG 5, i.e. gender equality on the flight deck. The number of female pilots represented on Instagram may be viewed to exceed the

Figure 12. KLM pilot inside the aircraft (Instagram 2018).

average number of female pilots globally (5.26%) (ISWAP, 2020). Therefore, the images featuring alternative representations (i.e. female pilot) become essential as they create a more diverse narrative surrounding the pilot discourse.

Another way this theme was made evident is through the representation of sexuality and Pride, an annual celebration of the LGBTQ+ community mostly embraced in North and South America, Australia and New Zealand, as well as parts of Europe. While the participation of Pride and celebration of freedom of sexuality of employees are present at KLM and Qantas, it is relatively minor. Virgin Atlantic, by contrast, offers more public acceptance. An example of this may be found in an image of two cabin crew members waving Pride flags (Figure 13). Flight attendants are mostly at the forefront of this movement, and airline pilots are notably absent. This is unsurprising considering the chronic staging of the female body, and flight attendants more broadly, as aesthetic symbols. The habitual use of flight attendants also perpetuates a stereotype that male cabin crew are often gay, sometimes deploying a 'campy' style (Bissell et al., 2012). A small series of dedicated posts (26) most frequently presented by Virgin Atlantic and notably absent from Emirates, implied cabin crew's sexuality through visual signifiers commonly utilized to represent camp culture, such as the Pride flag and colors, events (i.e. Mardi Gras), presence of 'Drag Queens' and 'gay' celebrities. Though the message is one that articulates an acceptance of sexuality, the progress is problematic as inclusive images that counter gender stereotypes must include the participation of employees at all organizational levels and roles in order to evoke systematic organizational change.

While KLM, Qantas, and Virgin Atlantic are gradually revising gender-based occupational stereotypes, Emirates is considerably muted in their images that run counter to traditional gender role portrayals. Failing to provide consistent alternative portrayals of 'men' and 'women' with the selected occupational roles, Emirates reveals limited progression in their efforts to modify normative gender and sexual identities within their organization. The airlines' Emirati culture may dictate their absence and lack of equal representation and public endorsement of sexual orientation (Stephenson, 2014).

Figure 13. Virgin Atlantic flight attendants waving Pride flags (Instagram 2019).

Also important to consider in some of the shared images is intersectionality; that is, the interplay between gender and other subject positions such as race, age and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1991). Similar to the representation of sexuality, the representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (BAME) as displayed by the airlines is limited and relatively inconsistent. The representations of BAME workers included the occasionally heightened visibility or over-exposure of the same Virgin Atlantic BAME flight attendants. Heightened visibility, according to Kanter (1977), may be viewed as racial tokenism, a highly skewed group comprised of a large dominance of one type of person (i.e. 'white') over another (i.e. BAME). The consequence of tokenism creates additional stress and increased pressures of performance (Young & James, 2001), particularly for women of color in tourism, who often suffer from a double form of discrimination caused by both sexism and racism (Chambers, 2021). Airlines should consider lending greater recognition to the representation of marginalized and disadvantaged groups in their operations and their Instagram postings in order to challenge broader normative perceptions regarding who belongs in aviation employment.

This paper argues that Instagram posts that may be interpreted as disrupting the everyday presentation of existing gender roles in the aviation industry are deliberate and conscious content that articulates messages around equality, diversity and inclusion. The imagery shared by the selected airlines on Instagram that challenges the certainty of gender roles was relatively inconsistent. Though some airlines attempt to contest the male pilot/female flight attendant dichotomy, compared to the everyday presentation of images that reflect the division of labor, the 158 counter-images, due to inconsistent exposure, are easily overlooked. The general lack of recurrent counter representations suggests that stereotypical portrayals of gender in aviation on social media are dominant.

Conclusion

This paper uncovered the construction of gendered imagery in aviation employment on Instagram. A feminist poststructuralist perspective was used to identify dominant discourses, as

well as the complex practices and representations of gender in aviation. Our review of 1,385 images across four of the most followed airline Instagram accounts revealed an excessive use of playful imagery of female flight attendants based on the objectification of women. The habitual showcasing of female flight attendants in the cabin space across the airlines was visibly hyper-feminized, closely resembling and reproducing hegemonic gender norms, stereotypes and performances that reflect popular media. The majority of the images shared on Instagram by the airlines continue to reproduce gendered divisions, offering irregular examples of images that challenge normative gendered performances. Thus, while some gender-based occupational stereotypes in the aviation industry are being challenged, many other gender stereotypes and performances are reinforced, making it challenging for airlines to attain SDG 5: Gender Equality.

The academic contribution of the paper is twofold. First, in line with other recent studies on gender in aviation (e.g. McCarthy et al., 2015), the analysis of the representation of gender in aviation undertaken in this study contributes to the growing body of research that explores the unequal distribution and portrayal of gender in aviation. Unlike previous research that identified the recurrent display of males on the flight deck and females in the cabin in mainstream, 'traditional' media (i.e. television, print media and advertisements) (c.f. Baum, 2012; Duffy et al., 2017), this study extended the media landscape by providing a social media perspective on long-established gender issues in aviation. The imagery airlines distribute via the everyday-ness of Instagram play an important role in the construction of broader normative perceptions regarding who belongs in aviation employment and in what roles they belong. Consequently, such visual images play a part in dictating shared understandings of the sort of roles men and women are assumed to perform and what those performances look like.

This study found that on Instagram, women across the four airlines are largely presented in visible and overtly sexualized, service roles (cabin crew) and the representation of women on the flight deck reflects continuing gender skews. The depiction of employee bodies across the airlines leaves room for improvement and highlights the need to challenge well-established conceptions of gender roles as a way to reconfigure what it means to be male or female in aviation employment. This includes other subject positions such as race, age, ethnicity, and sexuality. Viewing gender in isolation is simplistic and does not allow the consideration of how gender intersects with other sub-identities. Addressing inequalities in aviation involves avoiding tokenism and recognizing the unique challenges associated with the overlap and multidimensionality of social identities (Crenshaw, 1991).

Second, this study is the first comprehensive assessment to include evidence of alternative portrayals of 'men' and 'women' in aviation employment and how Instagram may be used as a site of resistance and a way of 'undoing' gender stereotypes. Social media has most recently been identified as an important tool in social activism in tourism (Ram, 2019). Our study found that though the majority of images shared by the airlines convey traditional and cultural values of the male pilot and female flight attendant, occasionally presented among them are small examples of alternative representations that disrupt the idea of cabin work as 'women's work' and piloting as 'men's work' (Barry, 2007). Such integrations are central to the project of achieving sustainable development in tourism (Boluk et al., 2019; Moreno Alarcón & Cole, 2019). However, the subtle integration of alternative identities that contest the certainty of 'doing gender' and improve the prospects of alternative identities (i.e. female pilots and male flight attendants) is diminished by the general lack of recurrent counter representations. While some progress has been made to enhance gender equality, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls remains unfulfilled (UN 2020). The digital representation of gender in aviation employment, which is reflective of gender segregations that persist in today's industry, influences public perception.

Further, the gendered performative practices as displayed in the digital environment contributes to the 'lower' social status of certain occupations (i.e. cabin crew) and plays a constitutive role in the materialization of gender. Presenting traditional and non-traditional images of gender

is somewhat problematic as the non-traditional challenge, at the same time that the traditional reinforces, gender-based occupational stereotypes. Multiple representations deliver a message of hesitation, one that does not support the complete integration of gender across all aviation roles. The multiple representations brought forward in the digital environment also contradicts the messages of diversity, including ideas communicated by airlines in their organizational documents that claim a dedicated approach to undoing gendered divisions (Smith et al., 2021). The dissonance between airline organizations' goals and the methods used to achieve them contributes to the construction of gendered discourses that remain deeply embedded in aviation culture. The representation of male and female employees across all aviation occupational roles should actively strive to become equal, so that images that challenge stereotypes become mundane, thereby fundamentally altering dominant masculine discourses that reproduce hegemonic gender norms and performances.

This study has important practical implications. As indicated by the findings of this research, the aviation industry is one that still perpetuates gendered meanings that hold implications for men and women. To challenge the stability of femininity and masculinity as binaries, airlines can use these findings to gain an understanding of how pervasive imagery that supports gender-based occupational segregation may undermine their efforts to improve the representation of men and women in aviation at all organizational levels. Changing airline organizational images about gender may broaden societal perceptions of what airline work looks like and who can perform them.

There are some limitations of this study that should be considered in order to strengthen the direction of future research. The findings of this paper are based on carefully curated social media posts that have been designed to directly communicate the desired impression. While they offer a direct window into the social world of the airlines who create them, the images may lack representativeness and therefore remain contextualized through the focus on the four airlines and Instagram. There are several avenues for future research to consider. First, further research should analyze airlines from a range of different regions of the world and seek to more closely examine gender alongside other identity positions (e.g. race, age and ethnicity), as this may be advantageous in gaining a deeper understanding of inequalities that have not been made evident through a gendered focus. Second, future research should explore the influences of normative gendered performances to gain insight into how individuals configure them. Thus, future qualitative research needs to be conducted with individuals working in and performing these roles. This perspective may be advantageous in uncovering how individuals perform and negotiate their gendered identities in relation to the construction of normative gendered roles produced by airlines.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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