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Reshaping Gender in Airline Employment

ABSTRACT

Air transport and tourism are interdependent systems wherein representations of gender are shaped by organisational cultures. Although airlines have progressed their gender balance, cabin crew work remains archetypically feminine. Taking a feminist poststructuralist approach, this paper uses thematic document analysis to examine how gendered discourses are constituted within airline organisational narratives through text, gestures and symbolic signs. Findings reveal that while airlines work to increase gender equality in employment practices, their efforts predominantly focus on the cockpit, neglecting roles beyond the flight deck. The paper recommends airlines broaden their gender equity focus to all roles and provides a basis for reshaping airlines' gender policies and practices.

Keywords: Masculinities, femininities, airlines, gender performance, gendered work, feminist poststructuralism

1. INTRODUCTION

Aviation and tourism are interlocking systems, with air transport providing essential global and regional networks, connecting visitors and destinations (Bieger & Wittmer, 2006; Duval, 2013; Graham, Efthymiou & Papatheodorou, 2015; Lohmann & Duval, 2011; Papatheodorou & Forsyth, 2010). The industries' mutually dependent interrelationship (Spasojevic, Lohmann & Scott, 2018) also means economic, social and political changes may result in shared challenges (Papatheodorou, 2021). Categorized as an integral part of the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2019), aviation, alongside tourism, plays a role in constructing place identity and influencing national identities for visitors and residents (White, 2018). Creating and distributing images of national symbolism, both the air transport and tourism sectors are tangible place representatives that construct national identity, shape cultural perceptions and inform gender norms. Thus, air transport and tourism are inextricably linked and reflect a multifaceted, complex relationship (Bieger & Wittmer, 2006).

Baroness Raymonde de Laroche and Harriet Quimby were among the first women to earn a pilot's license in the early 1910s, providing the essential first step in challenging the male pilot ideal and setting the standard for future generations (WAI, n.d.). Despite their early involvement, the role of women in the aviation industry in the 1930s was mostly limited to stereotypical 'feminine' roles (i.e. nurse and hostess) (Barry, 2007). Shaped and disciplined by androcentric biased airline organisational cultures and structures, the image of the female flight attendant and the male pilot has persisted through generations. Consequently, preconceived ideas about what it means to be 'male' and 'female' in aviation employment have largely remained. Despite embedded gender inequalities, some progress has undoubtedly been made towards questioning gendered roles in aviation. Yet, the integration of women on the flight deck is gradual at less than 1% over the past decade (CAPA, 2018), drawing into question the effectiveness of airlines' gender equality policies. Today, the proportion of female airline pilots globally ranks at approximately 5% and female captains at 1.43% (ISWAP, 2020). By comparison, the flight attendant occupation is heavily female-dominated. Some evidence of this is found in the US, where approximately 79% of flight attendants

are women (WAI, 2018). These figures echo the numbers of other gendered sectors, including tourism and hospitality, where women are overrepresented in service and clerical level jobs (UNTWO, 2019). However, unlike these sectors, progress in the aviation industry is gradual (Ferla & Graham, 2019) and much structural work remains to address its lack of women, particularly within senior roles.

However, with limited information made available on the global numbers of male and female staff in the cabin, the lack of statistics on gender constitutes a significant barrier to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the distribution of gender across the airline labour force. Available figures do indicate, however, that the industry is spatially dominated by the double form of overrepresentation of men in leadership and technical roles (pilots and engineers) and women in service-facing roles (cabin and ground crew) (Ferla & Graham, 2019; Lutte, 2019).

This paper consequently aims to examine how gendered discourses are constituted in airline narratives, through a focus on text, gestures and symbolic signs within organisational cultures and ideologies. Underpinned by understandings of gender-as-performance and critiques of hegemonic masculinity (Lui, Li & Wu, 2020), the paper adopts a poststructuralist feminist approach, which seeks to deconstruct gender dimensions through increased understanding of society (Alcoff, 1988). The paper first draws on organisational management literature to provide an understanding of gendering in organisations before turning, more specifically, to the gendering of the aviation industry and the gendered nature of airline professions. The methodology is then detailed, with the paper's empirics based on a qualitative document analysis of the femininities and masculinities produced and disciplined in airline cultures, across four airlines – Emirates, KLM, Qantas and Virgin Atlantic. The paper then presents its empirical findings and analysis followed by the conclusion and recommendations for airlines on improving gender equality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Gendering in organisations*

Organisations are sites in which cultural images and societal gender ideals are developed, reproduced and maintained. In one of the first studies of organisational cultures, Kanter (1977) explored how organisational structures and culture shape employee behaviour. Framed around economic and social issues, Kanter (1977) argues that gender differences in organisational behaviour are directly influenced by the structure of the organisation rather than the assumed characteristics of women and men as individuals. The organisational structures and cultures, which typically follow masculine principles, also dictate the desired skills and characteristics of specific occupational roles and the type of people that should occupy them (Lewis & Simpson, 2012).

Underpinning the male/female binary is the concept of gender essentialism, the belief that there are essential characteristics (properties) that are necessary to be a 'man' or a 'woman' (Witt, 2011). Gender essentialism emphasises the biological differences between 'men' and 'women' and uses the assumed obviousness of sex as a natural biological fact to inform the values and characteristics that determine the manner in which each gender ought to behave (Mikkola, 2017).

Feminist scholars have drawn on the concept of performativity to deconstruct gender essentialism. Viewing gender as 'doing', implies that rather than being a given, gender is performed (Paechter, 2007). The performance of gender is one that is repeatedly enacted and reinforced by societal norms and everyday interactions (Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Femininity and masculinity are the characteristics associated with being male or female. Femininity refers to stereotypical traits including empathy, sensitivity and care. In contrast, masculinity is characterised as strong, authoritative and technically competent (Connell, 2014). 'Femininities' and 'masculinities' describe gender identities and are ways of 'doing gender' (Kelan, 2010) that have been shaped by

socio-cultural processes. They are plural, learned, and constantly reworked (Paechter, 2007). Various forms of femininities and masculinities are constructed within particular communities. To be successful within a particular community, such as aviation, requires individuals to regulate their performance in a manner that reflects community norms and practices. This draws attention to the disciplinary nature of the constructions and performances that enforce societal norms (Foucault, 1977). This paper argues that constructed gender differences in organisations work to reinforce ideas of gender essentialism and render hierarchical gendered roles.

Perpetuated by the processes of socialisation and reinforced through everyday interaction, work becomes performed by bodies deemed most appropriate to perform it (Ashcraft, 2013). Within tourism studies there has been an increasing emphasis on viewing gendered work as a fluid performance of femininities and masculinities, rather than an unproblematic binary division (c.f. Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Lui, Li & Wu, 2020; Pritchard & Morgan, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Moving beyond gender essentialism, towards understanding the processes of gender construction in organisations, is essential in furthering understanding of the ways organisations contribute to gendered identities.

2.2. Gender as the basis for occupational segregation in airlines

As one of the most male-dominated industries in the transport sector, aviation faces many challenges in meeting societal demands for gender equity. Currently, 40% of the UK airline industry are women (European Commission, 2017), suggesting a relatively equal division of gender. The figures, however, are deceiving as there is little distribution in roles when considering gender. While men typically occupy roles such as pilots, women have generally been limited to cabin crew (McCarthy, Budd & Ison, 2015). It is important to identify the historical emergence of these roles. The flight attendant occupation, for example, which took permanent shape in the 1930s (Barry, 2007), previously required a nursing degree to attend to the 'safety' and 'care' of passengers (Huang, 2011). Major airlines, including Northwest and Trans World Airlines, placed additional requirements on physical appearance, i.e. maximum weight (53kg), height (1.63m) and age (25) and marital status (single) (Barry, 2007; Huang, 2011). Consequently, the image of the flight attendant became that of the 'pretty', 'slim', 'young', 'available sky girl' (Barry, 2007); a common appearance demanded of women working in the tourism and hospitality sector (Baum, 2012; Sinclair, 1997). Airlines play a crucial role in relation to the tourism industry, in part by establishing symbolism surrounding the ideal tourism worker. This is evident in the case of Singapore Airlines' 'Singapore Girl', who is alleged to epitomise Asian beauty and hospitality (Wang, 2016). The Singapore Girl attempts to evoke cultural characteristics that represent significant brand value - promoting 'her' as the corporate image plays an essential role in symbolic nation-building, national identity and destination branding. While representations of the female flight attendant have since evolved, the gendered performance of this role remains.

A pleasing outward exterior and nursing qualifications emphasised the assumed 'feminine' characteristics of the flight attendant profession, which led to the full integration of women in aviation. Becoming entirely feminised by the late 1940s, flight attendants evoked the stereotypes that informed ideas about femininity (Hochschild, 1983); a notably common feature in the distinctively feminised segments of the tourism sector (Sinclair, 1997). Gender became deeply inscribed in the work, generally referred to as 'typical work' performed by women (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). While a nursing background is no longer required, the emphasis on care, comfort and hospitality remain essential elements of cabin crew work. Though a relatively ordinary component of the transport network, today, cabin crew work remains archetypically feminine (Ferguson & Ayuttacorn, 2019).

Conversely, the profession of piloting has historically been male-dominated (Mills, Neal-Smith & Bridges, 2014). For Walby (2011), ‘masculine’ gender structures are most prominent within these roles due to the technological features of the aircraft. The earliest image of the pilot was that of the experienced and skillful ‘masculine’ figure (Ashcraft, 2007). The association of pilots with men and masculinities has its roots in several sources, including the militarisation of flight and workplace practices (Ashcraft, 2007). Consequently, the creation of piloting as a male-only profession developed, resulting in the corporate image of pilots as certain types of men. As masculinity is relegated to the cockpit, the role of the male flight attendant is rendered invisible (Ferguson & Ayuttacorn, 2019). Equally, the imaging of pilots with specific skills and characteristics certainly contributed to the exclusion of women on the flight deck. Understanding the gendered nature of the aviation industry and these interconnections with tourism, reveals not only the process whereby gender is constructed, but also the processes by which it is maintained (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Though women are securing more positions as aerospace engineers and pilots, their participation in traditionally male-dominated roles in aviation remains relatively low (Table 1) (Lutte, 2019).

Table 1: Distribution of women in STEM in aviation roles

Occupation with the industry	% of women
Maintenance Technician & Airline Executives	<5%
Pilots	5%-10%
Aerospace Engineers, Dispatchers, Airport Managers, Air Traffic Controllers, Aviation Higher Education Leadership, Cybersecurity	11%-20%

(Adapted from Lutte, 2019, p.6)

A heteronormative ideal, as argued by Germain, Herzog and Hamilton (2012), has resulted in a gendered hierarchical structure in which women are notably underrepresented at most levels of authoritative positions of power (Acker, 2006), and overrepresented in less prestigious roles (i.e. cabin crew). Contributing to this chronic gender imbalance is the belief that the presence of women on the flight deck violates the normative expectations of femininity and threatens masculinity (Foley et al., 2020). Traits typically described as ‘feminine’ (i.e. ‘care’ and ‘empathy’) can be viewed as directly competing with opposing ‘masculine’ traits (i.e. ‘strong-minded’ and ‘courageous’). However, despite the disproportionate number of female staff, airlines are working towards retaining and increasing women’s participation in aviation (Ferla & Graham, 2019). IATA’s industry-wide voluntary ‘25by2025’ initiative which seeks to increase the underrepresentation of women and advance the gender balance in the airline industry by 25% by 2025, is one such example (IATA, 2019).

Between Hochschild’s (1983) investigation of cabin crew and emotional labour, and Ferla and Graham’s (2019) exploration of female representation in commercial aviation, the study of gender in aviation has gradually increased. Tourism and transport research have enhanced an understanding of sexualised labour (Whitelegg, 2005), gendered barriers (McCarthy, Budd & Ison, 2015), and the evolving image of the flight attendant (Baum, 2012). Previous studies in aviation focus on the lack of social acceptance (Newcomer et al., 2018), sexual harassment (Davey & Davidson, 2000), discriminatory recruitment practices (Baum, 2012) and ‘cultural sexism’ (Neal-Smith & Cockburn, 2009), all of which rest on societal presuppositions that women are different from men based on specific gendered assumptions about women’s ability. Equally, women are expected to adapt, conform to and negotiate masculinities to succeed on the flight deck (Neal-Smith & Cockburn, 2009). This implies that being successful in the organisation may require women to suppress behaviours that identify them as ‘typically female’. Though existing literature has provided foundational

knowledge into gendering in aviation organisations, it has rarely adopted a conceptualisation of gender-as-performance.

While a strong focus on women as pilots and flight attendants is evident, the literature is moving beyond this narrow view of gendered roles in airlines by gradually focusing on women in engineering and other male-dominated occupations (c.f. Foley et al., 2020). Although most gender studies in aviation have focused on women, it is important to remember that 'men have a gender, too' (Mumby, 1998, p. 164). Challenging the devaluation of male staff in feminised service roles, or the partial rejection of male experiences, is essential in transforming gendered meanings in aviation and tourism.

It is fundamental to recognise that the airline industry does not operate in isolation and that air transport and tourism are interconnected systems, functionally linked (Papatheodorou, 2021). Emphasising this relationship further, Young (2019) defines the importance of air transport as a 'connecting artery', one that through the movement of people across space, enables an exchange of social values produced in places by the tourism industry. Considering this alliance is crucial, as developments in transport may also contribute to growth in tourism and vice versa (Duval, 2007; Papatheodorou, 2021). In acknowledging the air transport-tourism relationship, this paper provides a broader understanding of some of the implications of gender inequality for both transport and tourism.

More emphasis is required in exploring femininities and masculinities as co-constructing discourses in airline culture. Accordingly, the present study deconstructs certain prevailing assumptions that exist within the sector by exploring gendered meanings attached to occupational airline roles. Examining the ways in which airline social agents constitute social reality through text, gestures and signs will provide an understanding of the processes responsible for constructing and disciplining dominant gendered narratives. The paper moves beyond the traditional focus on flight attendants and highlights 'messy' realities that may exist with the division of airline labour, including men as cabin crew and women as pilots. As such, the paper provides a basis for further challenging prevailing gender inequities in airline employment.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper follows a feminist poststructuralist approach to examine socially constructed gender ideologies that exist within airline employment. A feminist poststructuralist paradigmatic approach challenges the stability of femininity and masculinity as binaries, and instead, considers the fluid and historical mutability of gender (Alcoff, 1988). Feminist research that is shaped by theory can provide new knowledge grounded in the realities of lived experiences and help to enact structural changes in the social world.

The study employed a qualitative research method using document analysis to examine the construction of femininities and masculinities as produced and disciplined in airline cultures (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis, according to Bryman (2003, p. 105) may 'provide information on issues that cannot readily be addressed through other methods' and is, therefore, an appropriate method that can render quality data with regards to this study's research aim. The organisational document sources in this study were viewed to reflect what the airlines' officially communicate rather than what they do in practice. Four airlines were selected for this purpose - Emirates, KLM, Qantas and Virgin Atlantic. This purposive sampling was based on the judgement of the research team with regards to the sensibility of the airlines' geographical spread, brand images, organisational cultures, gender distributions and business models (Bryman, 2012). Currently, only 2.25% of pilots at Emirates are women (ISWAP, 2020). Moreover, while the total number of female pilots in Europe averages 5.61%, at Virgin Atlantic, only 3.21% of pilots are women. Reflecting the overall European figure

somewhat are the number of female pilots at KLM (4.83%). Qantas ranks highest amongst the selected airlines where 5.68% of pilots are women (ISWAP, 2020). Whilst there are some discrepancies between the airlines, the figures indicate that a large gap exists across the industry. More women are securing roles as pilots, however, the increase is only gradual at less than 1% over the past decade (CAPA, 2018). Whilst the numbers of female pilots are well documented, there is limited information available on the number of male and female cabin crew. This lack of gendered statistics may reflect and contribute to the undervaluing of this profession.

3.1. Data collection and analysis

This study used qualitative document analysis, a systematic procedure that, in this case, encompasses the identification and consideration of documents related to gender (Mogalakwe, 2006; Patton, 2002). As a research method, document analysis was deemed appropriate due to the wealth of information and detail provided within the documents (c.f. Yin, 1994), which may be used to gain an understanding of gender in airline employment with both depth and reach.

Websites and related documents across the four airlines were chosen based on purposive selection; a non-probability form of sampling, which refers to the selection of documents guided by specific criteria (Bryman, 2012). The documents were selected on the basis that they included content on divisions of labour, gender performances, the appearances of cockpit and cabin crew and discussions of diversity and inclusion. Based on this sampling criteria, the study's search began by visiting the official careers websites of the four airlines. Corporate websites are essential tools through which organisations manage impressions. They may also be used to present the state of gender equity and provide actions to improve gender diversity (Windscheid et al., 2018). The initial sources made references to related pages including organisational blogs, press releases and news media (i.e. Emirates Media Centre, KLM Newsroom, Qantas News Room and Virgin Atlantic Ruby Blog). Organisational blogs are alternative platforms used to produce symbols and messages (Catalano, 2007). They may be used to create a favourable image, disseminate and generate content and engage in transparent digital public dialogue (Agerdal-Hjermind, 2014; Puschmann, 2010). The material contained in these sources led to additional supporting documents (e.g. Social Rights and Ethics Charters), reports (e.g. Annual Reports) and visual media (e.g. YouTube) that provided an understanding of the airlines' organisational business practices and policies with regards to gender. Ten websites and 18 organisational documents, resulting in a total of 755 pages, were stored and analysed. This paper also made use of the accompanying imagery and videos linked or associated with the organisational documents. These images were utilised to enhance additional layers of meaning and to support textual data (Rose, 2016). Due to General Data Protection Regulation copyright restrictions, which prohibit the reproduction of images, the visual images collected as part of the document analysis cannot be reproduced. Instead, this paper adopts Pearce and Wang's (2019) use of custom illustrations commissioned by the research team to represent research findings.

Data were collected during a dedicated two-week period in October – November 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. As there were large amounts of information available, adopting and following a rigorous process was necessary to maintain credibility and trustworthiness (Mogalakwe, 2006). For this reason, raw data were stored in well-organised archives. Airlines' documents were converted into a portable document format for long-term preservation (Nowell et al., 2017), thus ensuring the storage system preserved the original content, allowing the data set to remain unchangeable and physically accessible. Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through triangulation using multiple data sources (Decrop, 2004). A record of reflective thoughts about potential codes/themes were kept in an ongoing reflexive journal alongside reflections on the lead author's positionality. Keeping records of raw data, notes, and initial ideas are essential in creating a clear audit trail, a method of providing evidence of the decisions and choices made (Nowell et al., 2017).

Interpretive thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were used to manually analyse the data. Thematic analysis examines the ways in which realities and meanings are influenced by a range of discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an appropriate approach to deploy in feminist-led research. Data analysis involved: (1) the immersion process of data familiarisation through repeated reading of data and recording initial ideas surrounding the divisions of labour, gender performance, appearances of flight crew and diversity and inclusion, (2) preliminary coding by repeatedly reviewing data that presented dominant discourses perpetuated by airlines, (3) development of primary themes and how different codes may contribute to distinct patterns, (4) reviewing and evaluating themes and sub-themes; and (5) defining and naming concrete themes related to the research aim. Themes are presented in the findings below using carefully selected textual and some visual extracts.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four key themes related to gender in aviation were identified across the airlines' documents: (1) Gender equity, (2) Gender and labour, (3) Role models as inspirational ideals and (4) Stakeholder partnerships on gender issues. The following sections discuss each theme, in turn, with supporting illustrative excerpts.

4.1. Gender equity

Notably present across the selected four airlines is the concept of gender equity. It signifies the extent to which the airlines acknowledge ingrained gender inequalities and the means by which they seek to ensure deeper change to address these organisational inequities. These two interrelated issues are presented sequentially.

4.1.1. Awareness of gender equity

An awareness of existing gender inequalities within an organisation is essential in the workplace environment as they shape societal gender inequalities and produce new ones for social change (Aguilera et al., 2007). All analysed organisational documents offered an awareness of gender equity referencing the unequal distribution of women and the need for more diverse and inclusive working environments. The degree by which awareness was discussed varied significantly. For example, within its Annual Report, a 201-page document, Emirates only mentioned women and their roles within the airline on five occasions by drawing attention to their involvement in International Women's Day and the '*wide-ranging job roles*' held by women (Emirates Annual Report, 2019). In their Annual Report, Qantas draws one reference which describes their '*explicit goal of encouraging more women to pursue a career in aviation*' (Qantas Annual Report, 2019). Virgin Atlantic, referencing measures to promote gender equity, offer three instances that demonstrate an awareness of existing gender inequities. KLM, by contrast, revealed more awareness by dedicating a section on boosting diversity and inclusion (with a focus on gender).

We continued to build awareness and interest in topics relating to our products and services, our people, our sponsorships, our work with partners to progress the aviation industry, and our participation in world events like World Environment Day and International Women's Day. (Emirates Annual Report, 2019)

KLM has traditionally been a more masculine organisation, but the changes and challenges in the outside world have forced it to adapt. (KLM Annual Report, 2018)

Aviation has traditionally been a male-dominated field, particularly in leadership roles, but that's really changing...Gender balance is so important in aviation and operational

roles because it makes room for a diversity in opinions and ways of thinking. (Qantas News Room, 2019)

...the majority of our pilots and engineers are male and these jobs pay high salaries. Meanwhile, many of the women in our organisation are cabin crew or in retail and customer service, positions tending to have lower average pay...we also recognise that we haven't had as much progress as we would like with women in leadership roles, leading to a gender imbalance in senior positions, a trend observed in many UK businesses. (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.)

Building awareness and recognising existing gender inequalities within an organisation is an essential first step in challenging organisational culture and structures, which Plowman (2000) argues, is contextualised in a broader agenda of social transformation, a crucial component in bringing about change for all workers. However, despite some positive changes, all airlines articulate the need for further progression. Virgin Atlantic state that *'Although progress is being made across the board to enable women to access all opportunities possible, there's much more the industry can do* (Virgin Atlantic Blog, 2019a).

Awareness and identification of specific areas that demonstrate gender imbalance are essential in ensuring gender parity. While all airlines demonstrate some understanding of existing gender inequities within their industry, their understanding, as indicated by Qantas and KLM, is skewed as awareness of gender inequity focuses primarily on the lack of women in prestigious roles (i.e. pilot and leadership). Airlines should seek to gain a complete understanding of the varied layers of gender inequity to bring about change at all organisational levels.

4.1.2. Measures to promote gender equity

Measures are defined as the social actions taken by the airlines to promote gender equity within the organisation. Six out of 18 documents exclusively mentioned available initiatives and programmes taken to build a more inclusive and fairer industry, particularly for women. Stronger references and more dedicated discussions on the measures set in place were more commonly expressed on careers websites and corporate blogs.

In considering measures, the focus on the lack of women in prestigious roles (i.e. pilot and leadership) is again present across the airlines. Emirates references their National Cadet Pilot Programme which creates *'an environment that retains, nurtures and values them [female candidates] so they are able to progress and take a wider role within our industry'* (Emirates Media Centre, 2017b). KLM's 2018 Annual Report draws several references to the KLM Compass which *'links the company's purpose to a set of values and shows the balanced need of both masculine and feminine [feminine] labelled behaviour'* (KLM Annual Report, 2018, p. 60). This approach may be viewed as a way to *'...encourage concrete steps towards gender diversity...'* and *'...personal development'* (KLM Sustainability Report, 2018).

Virgin Atlantic run a series of women-specific initiatives and opportunities that establish supportive social spaces and *'inspire girls into STEM based careers'* (Scarlet Networks) (Virgin Atlantic Blog, 2019b) and create opportunities for personal and professional development (Springboard). Springboard, a programme designed and developed by women for women, targets *'females in entry to mid-level positions who want to enhance their skillset'* which *'could help them move up into leadership roles when opportunities arise'* (Virgin Atlantic Careers, n.d.):

It can help you take ownership and shape the change you want in practical and realistic ways. A women-only environment provides participants with the most effective

learning environment – the content and exercises are particularly relevant to women. To help strengthen our talent pipeline and enable us to achieve our ambition of 50:50 gender mix within our leader population by 2022. (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.)

Measures used to promote gender equity within Qantas include the Nancy Bird Walton initiative and Future Pilot Program. Named after the pioneering Australian aviator and role model Nancy Bird Walton, the initiative takes *'advantage of the opportunity to build a more gender equal future'* (Male Champions for Change, 2018) by improving on its 5% proportion of female pilots. The 2018 Future Pilot Program, which followed the Nancy Bird Walton initiative, *'commits the Qantas Group to a 20 per cent intake of qualified women...(which is in line with the proportion of women in aviation courses nationally) and to reach at least 40 per cent over the next decade'* (Qantas News Room, 2018). This is achieved *'by targeting STEM at schools, universities and flying schools'* to *'support more girls and women on a path to a career as a pilot within the Qantas Group'* (Qantas News Room, 2017).

The implemented measures demonstrate airlines' increasing efforts into equalising their labour force (Ferla & Graham, 2019). The most dominant message of workforce diversification is predominantly concerned with the progression of women on the flight deck and in leadership as they continue to face a number of gender-related roadblocks in their career paths (McCarthy, Budd & Ison, 2015).

4.2. Gender and labour

Labour divided between men and women according to their gender roles is referred to as gender-based division of labour (ILO, 2008). Emerging across all studied airlines in varying degrees is the division of labour based on gender. More specifically, the stigma attached to the aviation sector is viewed as one that nurtures an exclusively masculine image (Simpson, 2014), particularly in the cockpit. All career websites characterised desirable traits, skills and behaviours associated with the role of pilot and flight attendant. While the airlines do not exclusively communicate a specific gender, some of the wording and expectations of the role, particularly at KLM, contribute to the ideal image of a 'typical' pilot, as illustrated in the excerpts below.

You do need to possess a number of particular qualities to be a pilot, like being immune to stress. Luckily, this isn't required too often. You also have to be decisive - to be willing to take decisions. I do think things are changing a little now though...And yes, analytical skills, thinking ahead and, hence cooperating. These are all important qualities. (KLM Blog, 2018) [Female Pilot]

Professionals with a sky-high sense of responsibility and who are eager to learn. Because professionals never stop learning. Strong-minded pilots with the courage to take decisions. (KLM Careers, n.d.)

You aren't breakable, nor fragile, but you are open. (KLM Blog, 2018) [Female Pilot]

The excerpts demonstrate further awareness of the ingrained gender inequities while drawing subtle links to the masculine performances needed to succeed as pilots (i.e. analytical and technical skills, 'strong-minded' and 'courageous') (Mills, Neal-Smith and Bridges, 2014). Visually, while not equally represented, when depicted, male and female pilots are routinely portrayed in the cockpit or with/in-front of the aircraft (Figures 1 & 2). This strategic positioning also highlights their responsibility for the aircraft and its passengers, emphasising their position of power and authority. Figure 2, in particular, which depicts the presence of pilots in this technical space, may strengthen the idea that the occupation is one that requires technical and cognitive ability.



Fig. 1. Emirates Pilots posing in front of the aircraft (Emirates Media Centre, 2016)



Fig. 2. Virgin Atlantic pilots posing inside the aircraft (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.)

Though the airlines do not communicate a specific gender, the experiences shared by female pilots below offer some hesitation and challenges regarding entering the male-dominated industry.

...it actually took me a few years to say out loud [loud] that I wanted to become a pilot. I was quite shy as a teenager and it seemed to me that to become a commercial pilot was almost too ambitious and out of my reach and not what people expected me to do. (Virgin Atlantic Blog, n.d.) [Female Pilot]

I think there's so few women taking the pilot's seat because people just don't know about it as a career that's available to them. (Virgin Atlantic Video, 2019) [Female Captain]

These examples highlight some of the entrenched gendered stereotypes that need to be challenged to allow more fluid expressions of gender. The excerpts suggest that there are certain characteristics, skills and expectations linked to broader socio-cultural discourses that consolidate the idea of what it means to be a 'man' or a 'woman' and which gendered bodies are deemed most appropriate to perform the role of a pilot (Neal-Smith & Cockburn, 2009).

Presented strongly throughout all airlines' documents are cabin crew characteristics, desirable behaviour, personality traits and person specification. In describing the flight attendant role on their career website, KLM made eight references emphasising the importance of service and safety training. Following the description of desirable cabin crew characteristics, Emirates, in relation to recruitment and assessment, provides a dedicated section on its cabin crew website referencing their seven-step training process, emphasising '*safety comes first*' (Emirates Careers, n.d.).

One of the things you check is whether the flight safety equipment is in the right place. (KLM Careers, n.d.)

Our training programme is designed to equip you with all the knowledge you'll need to perform your role of Cabin Crew. It will also prepare you for dealing with any emergency or medical situations that may arise whilst on duty. (Virgin Atlantic Careers, n.d.)

You don't really realise that when you apply for this job that you are actually there for the safety for the passengers not only for the service. (Emirates Video, 2019a) [Female Flight Attendant]

She is there for our safety. She must be alert at all times. She has to have a ready smile. She must look smart. When she is in uniform, she must have the air of authority—no matter where she is... She has been “manning” our aircraft, as it were, since 1934. The stewardess—she is the paragon of service and impeccable under all circumstances. (KLM Blog, 2015)

While training and safety on board are present they are less frequent when compared to the service-oriented skills and passenger contact. For example, compared to the eight references made emphasising the importance of service and safety training, KLM referenced around 77 desirable cabin crew customer-focused characteristics emphasising the importance of giving passengers the *'personal attention they expect from KLM – and sometimes that bit more'* (KLM Careers, n.d.). As early as the 1980s, the airline industry established that flight attendants would perform their role not with technical skills, but through their 'innate' ability to provide care (Murphy, 2017). Many of these characteristics are reflected across the discourses perpetuated by the airlines.

Be prepared to adapt to any situation in a sensible, warm and in a safe way...Be genuine and caring when it comes to offer our customers food, beverages and anything else they may need to feel comfortable. (Qantas Careers, n.d.)

There are a number of qualities that we look for in our Cabin Crew. Above all we look for people who are resilient, supportive, caring, hands on and positive. (Virgin Atlantic Careers, n.d.)

You see a mother with a crying baby, you approach them and ask if you can help in any way. (KLM Careers, n.d.)

Hidden within such service-oriented skills are underlying truths associated with cabin crew work that represent distinctive 'feminine' characteristics, reaffirming the cabin aisle as a largely 'feminine' space (Hochschild, 1983). Comforting a mother and responding in a 'warm' manner, as desired by Qantas and KLM, reflect the 'feminine' qualities of the supportive 'mother' and caregiver (Lyth, 2009) (Figure 3).

A number of cabin crew-related videos (7 out of 20) and organisational blogs in this theme also emphasised the importance of male and female cabin crew's appearance, referencing 'grooming', 'health' and 'looking after yourself'.

Flying can be demanding on the body and Emirates provides health and fitness training to help maintain a healthy lifestyle...Grooming training includes advice on manicure, skin care and hair care including make-up and suitable hair styles. (Emirates Video, 2019b)

You have to try and make yourself look as fresh and beautiful as you can. It takes a lot of make-up sometimes but also long as you just remain with a positive attitude nothing else will go wrong. (Emirates Video, 2019b) [Female Flight Attendant]

I've always been very conscious of how I looked when going to work, but this is a different level altogether. You have to look immaculate, as it's part of the corporate image and the job. (Virgin Atlantic Blog, 2018) [Male Flight Attendant]

The persistence of weight (BMI), make-up, and grooming habits (Hochschild, 1983) are ways by which employees perform stereotypical heterosexual images of hyper-femininity (Figure 4). An Emirates YouTube video illustrates this further through its demonstration of a female flight attendant's grooming rituals (i.e. hair styling and full face of make-up) (Emirates Video, 2019c), a practice that to date remains a component of the flight attendant occupation, despite claims by each airline that gendered equality is of concern (Ayuttacorn, 2016). Grooming rituals and the careful attention to physical appearance may be viewed as a set of acts, daily practices and performances that conform to an expected gender identity (Butler, 1988) that consolidate the idea of what it means to be a woman working for an airline.



Fig. 3. KLM Crew member holding a child (KLM Blog, 2017)



Fig. 4. Emirates Crew Member applying Lipstick (Emirates Media Centre, 2015)

4.3. Role models as inspirational ideals

Role models are figures with whom individuals identify through comparison and similarity, and may be used to motivate individuals, particularly members of marginalised groups, to achieve ambitious goals (Morgenroth, Ryan & Peters, 2015). They play a significant role in helping individuals realise their potential within the stages of early (pre-school to primary) and career life (Gibson, 2003). The studied airline documents reveal a reliance on representational, 'distant' figures outside regular interactions (Gibson, 2003) who demonstrate the attainability of goals and inspirational role models that make goals desirable. Role models become fundamental in setting an example for others, especially in aviation, where women continue to lack the same professional opportunities as men (Ferla & Graham, 2019).

We hope they can continue to inspire and be role models for girls and women who are interested in pursuing careers in aviation. (Emirates Media Centre, 2017a)

I aim to be a good instructor. I've had several trainers who inspired me and served as good role models. I hope to be the same for some of tomorrow's pilots. (KLM Blog, 2018) [Female Pilot]

I had strong support from other women, and now that I truly feel equal, I hope the next generation of women see themselves as equal right from the start. [Qantas News Room, 2019] [Female Pilot]

The turning point for me and the moment of absolute inspiration and certainty that I wanted to become a pilot came when I was lucky enough to sit on the flight deck of a Boeing 767 when I was 16 on a holiday...I realised that it wasn't black magic! It was something that I COULD achieve if I put my everything into it. But most importantly from that day, I had a role model- one of the pilots was a lady and that's when in [I]

could imagine myself sat there-in my dream job. (Virgin Atlantic Blog, n.d.) [Female Pilot, emphasis in original]

By highlighting and showcasing the voices of women whose efforts have historically and traditionally been excluded from the discourses perpetuated by the aviation industry, the airlines are challenging normative gendered performances by acknowledging gendered work as a fluid performance of femininities and masculinities, rather than an unproblematic binary division.

Within this theme, the majority of documents drew on female role models as inspirational ideals. Only a small number of airline documents were used to highlight alternative role models and the challenges they faced in overcoming gendered barriers. Only one male Emirates cabin crew member, following in the footsteps of a familial role model, was identified as inspiring members of marginalised groups to achieve ambitious goals. Marginally increased efforts were found at Virgin Atlantic which offered six dedicated organisational blog posts of male cabin crew. Though their stories and experiences do not address gender inequalities within the airlines, their presentation may be used to inspire members of marginalised groups.

The female role models showcased across the documents may be effective in bringing further awareness to the entrenched gendered stereotypes within the airline industry that need to be challenged. Presenting successful female pilots as representations of the attainable, for example, may change the way in which external barriers are perceived and may therefore be viewed as a remedy for inequality (Morgenroth, Ryan & Peters, 2015). Within the context of this paper, the active showcasing of women on the flight deck questions the stable, normative expectations of femininity and masculinity and demonstrates the fluidity of gender expression that does not conform to mainstream societal gendered expectations. Though a starting point, to fully promote and accelerate actions for gender parity, airlines may also consider the value in showcasing women in less prestigious roles and other underrepresented subjectivities including male employees as cabin crew.

4.4. Stakeholder partnerships on gender issues

Collaborative partnerships are important in bringing forward more equitable outcomes. In this paper, partnerships are viewed as the level of co-creation and co-construction through collaboration between stakeholders (Lee, Olson & Trimi, 2012), and the joint efforts taken in addressing inequalities within the airlines. References to partnerships and working together on gender issues were found in six out of 18 organisational documents. Stronger links were noted across airline websites and blogs raising further awareness by providing dedicated content (Catalano, 2007).

All airlines engage in external partnerships including '*Dreams Soar*' (Emirates), '*Women in Aviation and Aerospace Charter*' (Virgin Atlantic) and '*Male Champion for Change*' (Qantas). These partnerships demonstrate 'partnering for parity', a means by which to strengthen collaboration for gender equality and move towards a 'we' proposition (Lee, Olson & Trimi, 2012). These unions are effective in tackling the quality of inclusion strategically.

These are important social debates for business to engage in, because they go to the heart of diversity and inclusion in our workplaces. The more 'pro-diversity' a workplace is, the more likely it is they can attract a wide range of talent. And the more they can benefit from the plurality of views. (Qantas News Room, 2015)

While diversity is beneficial to individual women and men, the broader story here is that diversity has a positive impact on the performance of the organisation. (KLM Annual Report, 2018)

Albeit by highlighting commercial benefits, the excerpts draw attention to the potential organisational advantage in adopting a more inclusive and diverse environment. This is most clearly represented in Virgin Atlantic's *Dream Gap Project*, a global initiative that seeks to level the playing field for girls through Barbie Dolls. The partnership with Barbie may be cause for concern, as the doll has traditionally represented an 'overtly feminine' and unrealistic ideal of the 'white', 'thin' and conventionally attractive woman (Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006), a stereotype commonly associated with female flight attendants as early as the 1950s. Yet, whilst not questioning the ideal version of femininity associated with cabin crew, it may be used to break down lingering stereotypes and to encourage girls to imagine themselves as pilots, cabin crew or engineers (Figure 5). As one female Virgin Atlantic employee stated: *I believe we can't be what we can't see and by introducing these dolls to the children then we'll be opening up all the job roles to both genders*' (Virgin Atlantic Video, 2019), thereby encouraging more women to consider aviation careers.



Fig. 5. Virgin Atlantic Dream Gap Project (Virgin Atlantic Blog, 2019c)

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this particular project is based on the idea that most 'girls' play with dolls (MacPhee & Prendergast, 2019). This assumption may inadvertently maintain gendered stereotypes and create barriers that continue to prevent those who do not identify as female, or those who do not align with the narrow representation of 'girls' presented through the dolls, from pursuing a career as cabin crew.

Unlike Virgin Atlantic, KLM appears to tackle their ingrained gender inequalities mostly through internal programmes. An example of this is the *'Women on Board Network'*, a democratic network that encourages *'concrete steps towards gender diversity'* and aims to *'connect and inspire women from different divisions and encourage personal development'* (KLM Annual Report, 2018). In KLM's pursuit of gender balance, the organisation primarily focuses on promoting the advancement of women in leadership and management positions (Ferla & Graham, 2019).

While all networks are a good starting point, companies today suffer a 'knowing-doing' gap (Women in Transport, n.d.) – the challenge of converting knowledge about how to improve organisational performance, in this case, diversity and inclusion, into actions that reflect that particular knowledge (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). This gap may compromise the achievement of real aviation industry-wide change and greater gender equality across the interrelated tourism sector.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examined how gendered discourses are (co)constructed and disciplined by airlines through focusing on how airline organisational narratives work to constitute social reality via text, gestures and symbolic signs. Adopting a feminist poststructuralist approach, the paper sought to identify potential androcentric biases within airline cultures. The paper reveals the persistence of gender binaries at organisational levels, which continue to perpetuate occupational segregation in airlines, though this state-of-play is gradually changing (Ferla & Graham, 2019).

Several key insights emerged with important management implications for the aviation industry. Regarding the lack of women in prestigious roles, discussions of gender across the airlines typically promoted the advancement of women in leadership and management positions and piloting roles drawing attention to the gendered barriers that prohibit the progression of women on the flight deck (McCarthy, Budd & Ison, 2015). Showcasing female role models as inspirational ideals is an effective way in which to progress women who have traditionally been excluded. Though essential to the progression of gender equality and gender equity, to enact social change and contribute to the deconstruction of broader structural issues, to an extent, requires moving beyond women in prestigious roles (i.e. pilot and leadership). Airlines should consider adopting a holistic approach to promote equitable and balanced situations for all genders at every level within the airline industry. Focusing on specific aviation careers may jeopardise the ability to resolve the deeply embedded gendered structures that effect the entirety of the airline industry.

Further, the strong emphasis on women in male spaces, has, to some extent, overshadowed the need to challenge the cabin space, a highly feminine space in which women 'doing' service is viewed as an extension of domesticity and femininity (Hochschild, 1983; Simpson, 2014). Airlines should broaden their focus and recognise that gender equity involves changing the situation of all workers. In doing so, they would be giving employees more visibility, which in a socio-cultural context, could contribute to the normalisation of men and women in varied industry roles (Ferla & Graham, 2019).

This paper provided new understandings of how perpetual constructions of gendered discourses remain deeply embedded in airline cultures. Our findings contribute to the growing body of literature on gender in aviation and tourism by demonstrating how gendered discourses are constituted within organisational narratives. These findings should encourage airlines to strengthen policies and management practices to achieve greater levels of gender equity and alter the fundamentally gendered nature of the industry. Promoting greater gender equality across the air transport sector is essential in advancing strategic growth and creating gender equity in tourism (UNWTO, n.d.).

Our study is limited in that the collected data reflect what the airlines are officially communicating, rather than what they do in practice. Further, while a range of sources were used within the document analysis, these are carefully curated, publicly available organisational messages that, whilst invaluable in gaining insights into the public constructions airlines wish to craft in relation to gender equity and gender equality, only reveal selective information, potentially allowing airlines some flexibility in diverging from what they do in practice. To further examine how airlines construct discourses related to gender, future research should consider the lived experiences and ontological realities of airline work, and how workers may negotiate and relocate dominant forces through their work. Further research may also consider the heteronormative and racial nature of airline organisational documents to investigate agendas of diversity within the sphere of sexual orientation. Subsequent research should equally consider the recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment in aviation, as many airlines have prioritised layoffs, suspensions and agreements with cabin crew, rather than pilots (BBC, 2020) – indicating yet again the value placed on pilots in comparison to cabin crew, as well as the potential of gendered inequalities resulting from or exacerbated by COVID-19.

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