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ACADEMIC WEEKLY DIGEST

YOUR WEEKLY DIGEST OF KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS



‘CREAMY AND SEDUCTIVE’:

Gender surveillance in flight attendant work

Despite attempts by the airline industry to cultivate more diverse working environments, flight attendants are still pressurised to conform to organisational aesthetics (i.e. physical appearance, uniform, application of make-up and appropriate hairstyles).

Interviews with flight attendants from Virgin Atlantic, Qantas and Emirates airlines done by Dr Whitney E. Smith reveal that airlines actively regulate and shape female flight attendants’ appearances.

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‘CREAMY AND SEDUCTIVE’: GENDER SURVEILLANCE IN FLIGHT ATTENDANT WORK

Whitney E. Smith, Scott Cohen, Albert Kimbu
& Anna de Jong

Adopting a feminist poststructuralist approach, this study examined how flight attendants perform and resist gendered identities by uncovering the ways in which airlines regulate and control through surveillance to produce the ‘ideal worker’. Informed by social norms and cultural context, the study found airlines exercise power through three main types of relational surveillance mechanisms, namely organisational rules, peer-surveillance, and self-surveillance.

While flight attendants predominantly conform to standardised gendered performances in accordance with socially and culturally ascribed rules, our findings also identify that flight attendants enact agency by

engaging in subtle forms of resistance that diverge from these narrow organisational gendered performances. However, surveillance mechanisms ensure that the hyper-feminine ideal worker was upheld, with even resistance remaining within the confines of normative identity construction.

Whilst airline organisations continue to promote particular aesthetic look, in an attempt to adapt to broader societal developments, Virgin Atlantic has made significant changes regarding gendered grooming standards by removing its long-standing makeup requirement, as well as offering trousers as an additional component of the female flight attendant uniform. Other industry-wide changes remain to be seen.

Airlines consistently shape and discipline flight attendants’ gendered grooming performances through rules, peer-surveillance and engendering self-regulation

Smith, W.E., de Jong, A., Cohen, S. & Kimbu, A.N. (2023). ‘Creamy and seductive’: Gender surveillance in flight attendant work. *Annals of Tourism Research*.

Link: bit.ly/40zbLAP