

## Still Red Hot? Post-feminism and Gender Subjectivity in the Airline Industry

### Abstract

This paper considers the relationship between post-feminism and gender subjectivity through a critique of the retro-aesthetic encoded in Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot* advertising campaign. Launched in 2009, and prompting a series of complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority, this high profile 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary campaign featured crowds of people staring in awe at a group of 1980's styled female cabin crew, and a male pilot, walking through an airport Arrivals lounge. As they pass they elicit a number of not only admiring glances, but also clearly sexualised responses, albeit portrayed in an exaggerated and, therefore, comedic manner, all set to the sound of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's *Relax*. Focusing on the relationship between performativity, materiality and signification, or what Judith Butler (1990) calls 'the scenography of production', the analysis presented here reflects on the co-optation process played out in this particular advertisement, arguing that while ostensibly parodying the sexual iconography associated with the airline industry, it can also be read as an example of the organizational appropriation of post-feminist ideas regarding gender, sexuality and subjectivity. The discussion emphasizes how this retro-styled campaign is dependent upon the commodification of a knowing, ironic and playful subjectivity pre-occupied with the self as a performative project, one that characterises post-feminist writing but which is at odds with a critique of the discrimination and disadvantage perpetuated within and by the industry.

### Introduction

The aesthetic economy must necessarily bet upon desires ... The development of these desires – desires to be seen, to dress up, to stage oneself – forms the basis for a new, practically limitless exploitation (Böhme, 2003: 81).

This paper considers post-feminist ideas on gender, sexuality and subjectivity, in order to highlight their co-optation within a highly successful, retro-styled marketing campaign – Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot*. In our analysis of this campaign, we draw on current debates on post-feminism within work and organization studies, emphasizing the co-optation of post-feminism's preoccupation with the self as a playful 'undoing' (Butler, 2004) of the constraining effects of gender ideology, and of feminism itself. We argue that this campaign co-opts post-feminism as a marketing strategy through the knowing, ironic evocation of

idealized forms of subjectivity. Our analysis emphasizes how this process undermines women's legitimacy and the credibility of their work within the airline industry, a line of critique that characterized union opposition to the campaign. It also perpetuates the potentially discriminatory effects of the aesthetic economy, glamorising a 'practically limitless exploitation' (Böhme, 2003: 81), as well as marginalising the emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour that cabin crew work demands. We also argue that in its mobilization of post-feminist motifs of choice and irony, the advertisement effectively precludes the possibility of sustained critical engagement, concluding that this provides an important insight into not just the advertisement itself, or the gender politics of the contemporary airline industry, but also into the cultural politics and organizational implications of post-feminism more generally.

Central to the aesthetics of management and marketing within service economies is the way in which gendered subjectivities are mobilized in order to affirm particular, but often unstable, regimes of managerially-desired meaning. Drawing on insights from Butler's (1990, 1993) critique of the gendered organization of subjectivity, and informed by recent accounts of post-feminism, our concern here is to develop a critique of the landscaping of corporate bodies and organizationally compelled ways of performing gender. We consider the images encoded in Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot* as organizing and compelling particular versions of gender that, we argue, are congruent with the ideals and aesthetics of the post-feminist, desiring subject (Gill, 2007). Our analysis emphasizes that such configurations are concerned with the narrowly prescriptive production of easily marketable, organizationally idealised gendered subjects.

In developing our critique of this process, the aims of this paper are threefold. First, we draw together relevant literature on 'branded bodies' (Pettinger, 2004) and the 'aesthetic economy' (Böhme, 2003) to consider the ways in which workers' bodies are encoded in marketing and advertising as material signifiers of a retro-aesthetic in which a glamourized past functions as an important contemporary cultural reference point (Mills, 2006). Here we consider how the past is evoked as a marketing resource in ways that are construed as ironic and playful in order to facilitate the perpetuation of idealized associations that might otherwise be taken seriously, potentially viewed as offensively retrogressive and hence, subject to valid criticism and opposition. In practice, this means that by framing such imagery as both historical and ironic, the organizational present can be marketed as post- rather than anti-feminist. Both the

airline and its consuming subjects are positioned, therefore, as ‘knowing better’ than their sexist predecessors, with an un-reflexive sexism being somehow ‘fixed’ in the past, so that its (knowingly ironic) successor can be mobilized as a marketing strategy in the present. Our first aim is to consider how, and why, this is achieved in this particular example, in order to understand more about the co-optation of post-feminist ideals in contemporary organizational life. Second, in developing a critique of this co-optation, and of the text itself, we draw on insights from recent debates surrounding post-feminism in media and cultural studies that to date have made important, but relatively limited, inroads into research on work and organization (for a notable exception, see Lewis, 2014, discussed below). Our objective in doing so is to argue that linking post-feminism to work and organization studies raises interesting and important questions about the relationship between signification and subjectivity that we seek to think through in our analysis, including ‘crucial questions about how socially constructed, mass mediated ideals are internalized and made our own’ (Gill, 2007: 154). We do so in order to pursue our third aim – to examine and evaluate the cultural framing of idealized forms of gendered subjectivity in the landscaping of inter-active service work. In this respect, our ambition is to subject a relatively high profile advertising campaign to critical analysis, engaging with the advertisement itself, along with responses to it from within the advertising and airline industries, as well as from trade unions, relevant advertising standards authorities, and via social media<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, we aim to consider the consequences of the framing processes involved, therefore subjecting both the advert itself, responses to it, and its broader implications to critique.

Methodologically, we seek to highlight the importance of studying the ways in which particular modes of subjectivity within work organizations are encoded and landscaped in and through contemporary advertising texts. We argue that the latter is particularly important to understanding how expectations of what particular jobs involve are shaped (Baum, 2011), as well as to interrogating how an ‘ideal employee’ is framed, and to thinking through what the exchange relationship is based on, given the sense of ‘reasonable entitlement’ that advertisements engender (Hochschild, 1983). As such, we seek to highlight the importance of linking texts such as *Still Red Hot* to organizational practices that serve to perpetuate discrimination, particularly those involving recruitment and selection. In this sense, we draw on Gill’s (2007: 148) emphasis on post-feminism not as a theoretical movement that can be mobilized or an historical shift that ought to be celebrated, but rather as a sensibility, ‘a way

of thinking about and perceiving gender and feminism'. Gill's (2007) understanding of post-feminism as a cultural sensibility, in this respect, defines it largely as an aesthetic phenomenon, discernible in various cultural motifs that, she argues, 'should be our critical object'. Just as Gill seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary cultural articulations of gender subjectivity that can be characterized as post-feminist, we strive to develop a similar critical evaluation of post-feminism within a particular example of contemporary corporate culture<sup>ii</sup>.

We begin by considering relevant literature on post-feminism, cultural signification and gender subjectivity. We then examine the ways in which what Gill (2007) calls a post-feminist sensibility can be identified in Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot* as a retro-styled advertising campaign, before reflecting on the broader consequences and implications of this campaign for understanding how the relationship between gender subjectivity and the ideal employee is framed in the contemporary airline industry. We argue that the images encoded within the advert constitute cultural configurations that organize and compel particular gender performances, emphasizing that it does so by mobilizing, and colonizing, the themes that characterize post-feminism as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Gill, 2007). We end by reflecting on the ways in which coalescences between post-feminism and retro-marketing (Brown, 2001) campaigns such as *Still Red Hot* undermine critical engagement and perpetuate a misrecognition of women's subjectivity and labour within the airline industry and beyond.

#### Post-feminism, cultural signification and gender subjectivity

Lewis (2014: 1848) has recently drawn on insights from post-feminism in her account of female entrepreneurs, arguing that for analytical purposes, post-feminism is best understood as a cultural entity 'made up of interrelated themes connected to a complex set of discourses'. Of particular interest to Lewis (2014), and developed here, is the connection between post-feminism as a cultural phenomenon, and organizational subjectivities. Aside from this notable exception, post-feminism has made relatively limited in-roads into work and organization studies thus far.

By comparison, a relatively burgeoning body of literature on post-feminist subjectivity has begun to emerge in media and cultural studies (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Tasker and Negra, 2005). Within this field, Gill (2007: 147) in particular has discussed how, despite

post-feminism becoming a widely cited reference point in contemporary cultural analysis, there is very little agreement about what it actually is. To date, post-feminism has been described variously as an historical period or movement ‘*after* feminism’ (see Hall and Rodriguez, 2003), as a political backlash *against* feminism (Faludi, 1992; Whelehan, 2000), as a theoretical development *within* feminism (Brooks, 1997; Yeatman, 1994), and as a socio-cultural phenomenon somehow *distinct* from feminism. We would argue that whatever form it takes, post-feminism also constitutes an important organizational phenomenon, discernible in corporate cultural discourses and artefacts that ought to be subject to critique, yet which remain relatively neglected (as noted above) within work and organization studies research.

Gill (2007) defines post-feminism with reference to a number of interrelated themes and motifs that are particularly relevant to work and organization studies. These include: an ‘obsessive preoccupation with the body’ as women’s source of power, identity and value (Gill, 2007: 149); a cultural sexualisation, marked by a symbolic vocabulary of youthful, unselfconscious pleasure seeking (see also Kim, 2001); an ‘emblematic blurring of the boundaries between pornography and other genres’ (Gill, 2007: 151; see also Walter, 2010); and a shift from sexual objectification to subjectification through which

Women are not straight-forwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who *choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests* to do so (Gill, 2007: 151, emphasis added).

With regard to this last point, Gill’s concern with post-feminism is primarily its neo-liberal, emphasis on individual choice and empowerment. Its concern with being and pleasing oneself means that, for Gill, post-feminism misleadingly presents women as autonomous agents no longer constrained or compelled by inequalities or power imbalances. As Tasker and Negra (2005: 107) note in this respect, this ‘choice biography’ packages freedom as a highly commodifiable entity, ‘effectively harnessed to individualism and consumerism’, seemingly reconciling feminist claims to subjectivity and autonomy with the consumerist demands of a capitalist society and a neoliberal political economy (see also Genz, 2006).

In contrast to this choice narrative within post-feminism, and its emphasis on contemporary gender subjectivity as freed from the constraining effects of earlier forms of feminism (McRobbie, 2004), our discussion below highlights the extent to which organizationally compelled modes of gender performativity (Butler, 1988, 1990) remain firmly encoded within the contemporary corporate cultural landscape in ways that perpetuate highly gendered ideals of aesthetics and embodiment. The images we consider can be understood, we argue, not simply as representative in this respect, but as performative in so far as they constitute what Butler (1993: 252) describes as a ‘gestural stylistics’. This means that they compel particular ways of doing gender according to organizational imperatives congruent with the aesthetic demands and defining characteristics of interactive service provision.

Recent research on emotional and aesthetic labour has emphasized how the expansion of service work coupled with the aestheticization of market societies and particularly the development of what might be described as an ‘aesthetic economy’ (Böhme, 2003), has resulted in a considerable emphasis being placed by employers on the body image that workers project and, particularly, on the branded or aesthetic quality of inter-corporeal encounters (Dean, 2005; Pettinger, 2004; Williams and Connell, 2010; Witz et al, 2003). Within this context, the presentation, maintenance and performance of a mode of embodiment that is specified or compelled by their employing organization has become a central component of the work performed by many employees. In this respect, workers’ bodies are required to act as material signifiers of what, in his analysis of the landscaping of corporate artifacts, Gagliardi (1990, 1996) describes as an organizational pathos. This concept – drawing on the Aristotelian distinction - is distinguished in his work from both the organizational logos (the ‘specificity of its beliefs’) and its ethos (the moral component of those beliefs) and refers to a particular way of perceiving and feeling organizational reality that transcends or rather bypasses the cognitive faculties of identification and instead, impacts directly upon the immediacy of the senses. It is in this respect, Gagliardi argues, organizational artifacts – material phenomena capable of being encoded with and so communicating a range of meanings – are able to play a unique role in the constitution of values, beliefs and actions and, we might argue, ways of being and doing.

Attempting to understand this process as a landscaping of performativity (author reference) leads us to explore here the critical potential of an aesthetically attuned semiotic approach to the study of managing and marketing gender as an aesthetic process, including the analysis of

corporate images of material artifacts such as workers' bodies, in order to focus on the ways in which such imagery is imbued with particular meanings that function as what Gell (1992) refers to as technologies of enchantment. This latter concept emphasizes how,

for those concerned with performance, [the aesthetic] ... suggests a mechanism by which the intellectual dimension of human cognition can be bypassed, generating a profoundly embodied and thus sensual relationship between employee and company (author reference).

Extrapolating from this observation, and linking it to the view that technologies of enchantment are particularly effective because of the ways in which they function within and with reference to shared regimes of meaning, such technologies are arguably at their most poignant when they work inter-subjectively. That is, when they attempt to engender some form of mutual recognition at the level of the aesthetic. In this context, corporate artifacts can be understood as being aesthetically encoded or 'made (i.e. simultaneously produced and enforced) to mean' (author reference) in particular ways. It is also important to keep in mind, however, that the capacity to enchant is socially situated; that is, 'based upon a complex web of socio-historically constituted experiences, meanings and expectations' (author reference). Hence, it is through the social context or reservoir of shared meanings that certain symbolic systems are able to operate in this way. In our discussion below, we argue that the cultural associations of post-feminism, with its emphasis on sexual subjectification (Gill, 2007), provide one such reservoir of shared meanings.

In taking this aesthetically sensitive semiotic approach as its starting point, and aiming to focus on the aesthetic landscaping of gender performativity through the 'enchantment' engendered by particular corporate artifacts<sup>iii</sup>, our discussion attempts to develop a critical analysis of the co-optation of post-feminism as a marketing strategy within Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot*. In the example considered below, we argue that this strategy is designed to compel organizational performances of gender that embody a particular retro-aesthetic and, in doing so, perpetuate a commercially shaped set of expectations governing inter-active service provision that might otherwise be regarded as culturally and politically regressive. Instead, in the mobilization of cultural resonances with retro-marketing and post-feminism, the campaign itself, and the gendered subjectivities it evokes, is able to present itself as a playful and ironic stylization.

Butler's performative ontology frames gender as the outcome of a series of stylized acts which, if performed in accordance with the norms governing the attribution of viable subjectivity, will be socially recognized as such. As Borgerson (2006) has emphasized, Butler's work provides an important linkage, in this sense, between semiotics and phenomenology, relating the study of signification (that which is imbued with meaning) to the development of a theory of subject formation. In this respect, Butler's approach to what she calls 'the scenography ... of construction' (Butler, 1993: 28) attempts to think through the relationship between subjectivity and signification, while her analysis of the heterosexual matrix identifies, as she puts it, 'a self-supporting signifying economy that wields power in the marking off of what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility' (Butler, 2000: 99-100). In this sense, Butler's theoretical emphasis is on the need to critically interrogate the ways in which viable subjectivity is shaped by a relatively narrow range of normative signifiers of who and what 'counts' as a valid subject. In our view, corporate advertising in which idealized forms of employee or consumer subjectivity are depicted is an important and interesting example of the ways in which this normative constitution of subjectivity is communicated and compelled within and through organizational culture.

Linking her account of gender performativity to the materiality of the body, Butler (1993) emphasizes that the semiotic configuration of the subject is orchestrated through regulatory schemas such as the heterosexual matrix that establish the criteria of intelligibility according to which certain bodies – those which are deemed to be sufficiently youthful or sexually appealing for instance - are granted or denied viability (in organizational terms, the latter broadly translates as 'employability'). In her discussion of the implications of this for how gender is performed, Butler focuses explicitly on the dialectical interplay between 'what it might mean to undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life' (Butler, 2004: 1) and the performative citation and materialization of gender normativity as a process of '*becoming undone*' (Butler, 2004: 1, original emphasis). In practice, this means that her approach highlights the analytical importance of understanding both how gender norms might be challenged and resisted as well as appreciating the harm, the 'becoming undone', inflicted by attempting to conform to their constraining or compelling effects. Emphasizing this theme, particularly in relation to Butler's (1997: 10-11, cited in Borgerson, 2005: 68) genealogy of the subject as 'a structure in formation', Borgerson argues that 'one recognizes here the fundamental role of semiotics ... in building a cohesive and coherent model of subject



formation'. In other words, crucial to the process of becoming gendered is the citation of relevant cultural reference points, including corporate imagery, that serve to encode who or what will be recognised as appropriately gendered. This is particularly important for those who seek employment in the airline industry in which appearance is a particularly significant selection criterion, but it is also pertinent as a broader cultural resource defining who or what 'matters' (Butler, 1993) in an aesthetic economy more generally (Böhme, 2003).

Linking this critique of subjectification to semiotics, our analysis of Virgin's *Still Red Hot* advertisement represents an attempt to interrogate this relationship between gender performativity, subjectivity and signification as it is materialized in, and mediated by, the landscaping of corporate aesthetics. Before commencing the analysis however, it is important to acknowledge what might be considered to be a particular weakness in our approach, namely that to shift from a largely phenomenological understanding of gender as a performative ontology to a discussion of corporate representations of gender is to misappropriate the essentially lived nature of phenomenological sense making; substituting it with a more structuralist and therefore potentially reductionist, understanding of gender as an organizational imposition<sup>iv</sup>. While recognizing the legitimacy of this observation, we would want to stress, however, that our interest is in the ways in which aesthetically meaningful artifacts, such as corporate marketing and advertising, serve to landscape organizational performativity, acting, to invoke Goffman (1974), as 'framing' devices, that work in conjunction with other cultural reference points in order to compose or compel particular ways of performing subjectivity. This in turn, enables us to explore the structural mechanisms through which meaning is managed; not simply at the level of symbolism but also at the level of the aesthetic, *framing* lived, embodied experience.

With this in mind, at the methodological core of our approach is what might broadly be termed a hermeneutic structuralism (Philips and Brown, 1993; Morrow and Brown, 1994) which recognizes the importance of seeking to interpret or decode various signifying systems with reference to the broader social context within which they are made to mean and, to borrow from Butler (1993), to matter (where matter, as noted above, means at once to materialize and to mean). Our analytical concern in this respect is with the aesthetic composition of particular ways of being within organizations, through the 'stylization' of corporate life, and with those constellations of signification through which particular organizational performances are composed and compelled. Corporate texts such as

advertisements can be understood, within this analytical framework, as performative artifacts that constitute strategic interventions into the perpetual process of becoming gendered. These artifacts compel particular ways of simultaneously doing gender, and in doing so, constitute mechanisms that attempt to materialize particular subjectivities congruent with contemporary organizational imperatives, such as those associated with the cultural claims and aspirations of contemporary post-feminism.

We develop this focus in our analysis of Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot* which, we would suggest, illustrates some of the ways in which gender performativity is landscaped according to the contours of contemporary corporate and consumer cultures and of broader socio-cultural formations such as the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2000), the aesthetic economy (Böhme, 2003) and in this particular case, post-feminism (Gill, 2007).

#### Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot* as post-feminist marketing

As Hochschild (1983: 5) puts it, because of the differences between the bodily dispositions implied, 'it takes an extra effort to imagine that spontaneous warmth can exist in uniform'. Where does that extra effort come from? Partly through the performance of emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour by those employed to deliver inter-active sales-service work, of course, and partly through the semiotic management of the corporate landscape, including its advertising, that compels such performances in the first instance. As Mills (2006) outlines, in the post-WW11 era of the 'jet age', formal policies of de-sexualization gave way to a process of eroticization of female employees within the airline industry, materialized in airline advertising and marketing, and other corporate imagery, in organizational practices underpinning recruitment, training and management, and in corporate discourses that conflated glamour and sexuality. While Mills (2006: 20) suggests that this eroticization of female labour gradually gave way to an 'employment equity discourse' from the 1970s onwards, research on the airline industry suggests that the demand for emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour continues to dominate men's and women's experiences of cabin crew work (Whitelegg, 2005; Williams, 2003), especially on routes and in classes of travel aimed specifically at the business travel market. Such research has drawn attention to the exploitative and discriminatory nature of this demand (Spiess and Waring, 2005; Waring, 2011), particularly in relation to its gendered performativity (Simpson, 2014) and impact on the practices and politics of inclusivity (Ashcraft, 2005; Ashcraft et al, 2012) within the

industry. It has also highlighted the extent to which the aesthetics of cabin crew work, particularly as these are perpetuated through corporate advertising, including recruitment imagery (Baum, 2011) are in no sense conducive to the more substantive demands of the job, such as responsibility for the safety and security of passengers on board an aircraft, or for the safe evacuation of said passengers in the event of an emergency (Boyd and Bain, 2002; Bolton and Boyd, 2005). Yet in addition to the corporate iconography of the industry itself, the sexualisation of the female flight attendant and the enduring myth of the glamorous 'hostess' remain ubiquitous in media and popular culture more generally; from Barbie's Virgin Atlantic incarnation to the best-selling Anne Summers flight attendant costume, the sexualisation of women's work in the airline industry remains firmly encoded in the popular consciousness.

It is against this cultural backdrop that Virgin Atlantic's *Still Red Hot* advertising campaign<sup>v</sup> must be understood. This particular advert has been described as both a 'classic example of tongue-in-cheek retro advertising' that 'plays upon stereotypes' (Firth, 2009), and as 'a means of portraying good, old-fashioned sexism while simultaneously distancing themselves from it', basically '*Nuts* with a veneer of retro sophistication' (Cadwalladr, 2009).

Created by advertising agency RKCR, Virgin Atlantic's high-profile 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary retro-styled TV ad campaign featured crowds staring in awe at six female cabin crew and one male pilot as they walk through a dreary Arrivals lounge, seemingly set in 1984, to the sound of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's *Relax*. One man inadvertently squirts hamburger sauce over himself while watching the women. At the end of the ad, two mesmerised men murmur to each other: 'I need to change my job' says one, 'I need to change my ticket', replies the other.

The advert begins with an opening shot of a news seller's stand with headlines referring to the Miner's Strike, effectively reducing collective resistance to an amusingly stylized, historical artefact akin to other period signifiers cited in the opening scenes (such as a dated-looking, over-sized mobile phone and a Rubik's cube). The greyscale of this opening scene contrasts markedly with the intense full-colour, particularly the use of red, in the next few scenes of the ad, which are glamorous by comparison. In this way, Virgin is effectively set up as the saviour of 'Britain in turmoil' (the headline of one of the newspapers in the opening scene), its glitz, glamour and entrepreneurial spirit is framed as the way to make Britain 'shiny and new' again. The latter is a reference specifically to pop-star Madonna's implied

presence in the advert; she (in the form of a 'look a like') walks through the Arrivals lounge at the airport to an assembled crowd of photographers only to be deserted by the cameras as soon as the Virgin flight attendants walk, en masse, into the area.

Drawing on insights from post-feminism and retro-marketing discussed above, within the remainder of the ad we can identify a neo-nostalgic, retro-aesthetic in the form of a chain of signifiers: 1980s style individualistic, materialistic, self-confidence is conveyed through music, clothing, and accessories such as mobile phones and brief cases. This combines with earlier, 1970s sexual glamour and self-assurance through an evocation of a Charlie's Angels aesthetic in the stylization of the women themselves. A much older harem metaphor is evoked, with its origins in the Ottoman Empire, reminding us that artistic representations from the Victorian era onwards tended to depict women in Turkish harems in red garments in order to signify the sexual passion and intimacy with which their bodies were associated. Sexually, the advert mobilizes a hint of 1960s sexual liberation with the women being positioned as relatively powerful sexual subjects, in control of their own sexual desire and that of others around them, at the same time as evoking a more traditional, 1940s and 1950s 'pin up' glamour-based image, with its connotations of the 'golden age' of the industry embodied in decorations on the planes and the cheeky wink of the closing shot. The latter in particular materializes Hochschild's (1983: 5) point that 'the plane and the flight attendant advertise each other', all compounded in this retro-aesthetic that serves to frame femininity and the labour involved in working as cabin crew in a particular way, one that foregrounds the pleasure of the aesthetic performance, rather than the labour involved.

Virgin's *Still Red Hot* advertisement prompted 29 complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) all objecting to the overly-sexualized depiction of women working in the airline industry (Sweeney, 2009; Firth, 2009). Yet the ASA dismissed these complaints, maintaining that there were no grounds for a formal investigation as it considered the ad to be 'unlikely to be seen as sexist or derogatory towards women or to cause serious or widespread offence'. (In contrast, the ASA upheld a complaint made against Virgin Atlantic adverts which showed an image of its Premium Economy seat on the grounds that the new, bigger seats and increased legroom depicted in the advert were not available to premium economy travellers on all flights. The ASA ruled that a disclaimer, which appeared in small text at the bottom of press and magazine adverts, was likely to be overlooked by readers.) Dismissing the claims made against the *Still Red Hot* advertisement, a spokesperson from the ASA said

‘we considered that most viewers would understand that the ad presented exaggerated stereotypical views of the early 1980s and *played upon perceived attitudes of that time in a humorous way*’ (cited in Firth, 2009, emphasis added). Virgin Atlantic responded: ‘The ASA has rightly dismissed these complaints, which probably come from competitors jealous of our fantastic cabin and flight crew. Our advert has been brilliantly received worldwide and reinforces why so many people want to work for Virgin Atlantic’ (cited in Firth, 2009).

Responses to the advert on social media are considerable and insightful, with hundreds of thousands of views for each of the links to the advert, and over 700 comments being posted on YouTube at the time of writing. As well as the specific content of the advertisement, these responses to *Still Red Hot* are interesting to consider because they provide insight into its broader context, and to the ways in which the ad is ‘read’ and potentially incorporated into social perceptions and performances of gender not only within but also well beyond the airline industry. In other words, they are important to understand the broader circulation of culture and capital associated with the gendered imagery depicted in the advertisement itself (Johnson, 1986).

Of these responses the overwhelming majority were supportive of the advert with a significant proportion of these adopting one of two related types of affirmative readings. The first consists of relatively defensive comments on the positioning of women, the organization and the airline industry, articulated largely through a choice narrative similar to the neo-liberal emphasis on individual freedom that Gill (2007) argues is characteristic of contemporary post-feminist discourse. These comments also express views on what is thought to be a particularly clever and thought-provoking use of the medium by Virgin Atlantic, and the industry itself, often making reference to the company as an industry or world leader, and to the range of awards bestowed upon the advert by the marketing industry. Examples of this response include simple statements such as, ‘This advert is brilliant. Airlines are lacking the kind of glamour these days that they used to have’, or ‘THIS IS JUST FANTASTIC...KUDOS TO CREATIVE WRITER storyboard was fabulous...followed every scene..well’.

The second group of comments consisted of largely aspirational celebrations of the glamour depicted in the advert itself, with men and women commenting in roughly equal proportions on the attractiveness of the flight attendants featured in the ad. The following is an example

of the latter: 'Love, love, love this commercial! Every aspect resonates with me. I [was] awestruck by those girls. I do not buy into the thought that they look slutty, just glamorous and beautiful the same thought I had as a child, would love to dress that great for work every single day.' Here the advert is positioned as enabling women to express their inner desire for glamour, and to find form in their espoused need to be recognised on largely aesthetic grounds. Virgin Atlantic is framed not only as the champion but also the conduit for women to express this desire and other organizations are contrasted as constraining women's ability to 'dress that great'. The evocation of reclaiming women's inner need to be glamorous, and of articulating this need as a constant for women throughout their lives ('the same thought I had as a child') echoes post-feminist suggestions that women should 'admit' to desiring the pursuit of glamour and beauty that feminism is conversely, positioned as deying us. Post-feminism is therefore framed, as it is articulated in the advert itself, and materialized in the bodies of the women on which it focuses, as speaking more directly to women's lived experience than are feminist ideals: 'every aspect resonates with me'. Other aspirational comments include: 'So who wants 2 be a pilot then??? Hahaha' and 'Does anyone know the names of those women?'. Another recent comment highlights the significance of the use of colour and style in the advert: 'One of the best airline commercials of all time. Classy, yet sexy. I LOVE the red shoes!' Another of the affirmative comments highlights the significance of the stylized women's bodies in the advert:

If you watch the ad again you'll see there are 2 male cabin crew in grey suits and red ties. I'm a bloke and crew for Virgin Atlantic, the girls always outnumber the guys, *not sexist, just the nature of the job*. Also, it's the girl's iconic red uniform that people think of and associate with Virgin Atlantic.

This male flight attendant's reference to the signficatory power of the 'iconic red uniform' frames the gendered positioning of women in the advert, and in the industry more generally, as 'just the nature of the job'. Here he seems to evoke a retrospective essentialism that moves the analysis somehow 'beyond' a feminist critique of sexism to conflate women's nature and the nature of the job, a comment that aligns with the one discussed above, referring to women's essential desire to be glamorous. The aspirational effect of this link, and the seductive power of the advert are emphasized in the following comment: 'This is the most awesome advert ever! Certainly makes me want to become a Virgin Atlantic stewardess!'

Of the comparatively limited critical comments posted on YouTube, a few emphasize concerns about the tension between the glamorous connotations of the advert and the nature of the work undertaken by flight crew, and the demands and training associated with it. For instance:

Don't like this advert. Not because of the 'sexism' but because the notion that flight crew and cabin crew are there just to look sexy in a uniform. You do realise that if there is a crash, they need to know the proper precautions are to ensure our safety? I don't see how them being sexy is going to help in that respect.

Here at least some acknowledgment is evident of the ways in which foregrounding what is presented as an effortless, and highly aestheticized, sexuality serves to deny a host of skills that ought to be accorded esteem and recognition.

Furthermore, a small number of contributors comment on the implied sexual objectification in the ad. For example, one woman notes that while such imagery might have been prevalent during the 1980s, it has no place on TV today:

Wow, that's so sexist it's not funny. The flight attendants are all female and glamorous, the pilot is male, and even though it's showing what it was like back in that time, it still shouldn't be shown today

Another comment, again apparently posted by a female traveller noted how, in their view, this was a 'Very sexist advert, and is directed at lustful men and not the women who travel with Virgin.'

We could find no responses to these critical comments from the company; hence no invitation to engage in a dialogue is implied, although there are a few individual comments that appear to have been posted in response to more critical reflections. Many of these make reference to similar points raised above regarding the negation of critical engagement on grounds of envy or bitterness (with one making explicit reference to women who find the ad offensive as having 'hairy armpits').

Our reading of this particular advert, as well as union, industry and social media responses to it, emphasizes how its spectacular nature illustrates the long-standing feminist claim that women are equated with the visual and are disciplined by the male gaze. Much like the

Wonderbra adverts of the mid-1990s (McRobbie, 2004), the composition of the Virgin advert provocatively plays with feminist critiques of women as objects of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Both adverts of course play back to viewers (including feminist critics) an imagined unleashing of energy repressed by a seemingly tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism and envy ('Every aspect resonates with me. I ... would love to dress that great for work every single day.'). At the same time, we might assume, the advert intended to provoke some criticism as a way of enhancing its publicity generating capacity and re-affirming the 'daring' nature of the organization and its iconography (still 'red hot', contentious, breaking boundaries and disrespecting taboos). Of course discerning viewers, as Virgin Atlantic's spokesperson and the representative from the ASA imply, are not expected to be offended by the self-conscious sexism inherent within the advert, the assumption being that they are well-schooled in (self) irony and are visually literate enough to 'get' the joke and to appreciate the layers of meaning inherent within the advert itself and its cultural reference points. In this post-porn culture (Walter, 2010) men and women alike are supposed to have moved beyond finding an implied sexual objectification of otherwise apparently empowered women as making anything other than a free choice, perhaps even a self-ironic one, with sexually objectifying oneself being positioned as the ultimate post-feminist motif (Gill, 2007).

Feminism itself then is undone (Butler, 2004), in so far as its demands are taken into account (the women are the focus of attention, they hold the 'power'), but only to be dismissed because feminism, in this retro-scape, is simply no longer necessary because there is no suggestion of exploitation or naivety here; these women are 'knowing subjects' (McRobbie, 2004). They are encoded as free to 'choose' for themselves, a freedom that is conditional upon the suppression of critique. However, this freedom is also conditional upon airbrushing out discrimination and disadvantage not just in the airline industry, but in the aesthetic economy (Böhme, 2003) more generally, with affirmative social media responses to the advert, and industry accolades, remaining largely oblivious to the injury and injustice such a move engenders. The imagery contained within adverts such as these, however, and their broader organizational and social connotations, serve to perpetuate recruitment and selection practices shaped by gendered, aesthetic discrimination in the airline industry (Bolton and Boyd, 2005; Baum, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Speiss and Waring, 2005) and more generally (Waring, 2011; Williams and Connell, 2010; Witz et al, 2003), reinforcing long standing



patterns of conditional inclusion and exclusion that undermine corporate protestations regarding equality and ethical practice (Ashcraft, 2005; Ashcraft et al, 2012).

Because of adverts such as these, and the wider corporate landscape they instantiate, male customers have strong expectations about the kind of service to which they are entitled, female customers (as noted above) are positioned within the same hyper-heteronormative service scape, and men and women more generally celebrate a post-feminist choice narrative that re-engages gender and sexual essentialism, precluding critique in the name of (self) irony, and (self) objectification. The triangulated nature of the demand for emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour in a service encounter such as this means that when all three coalesce (as the chain of signifiers in this advert suggest), 'great service' is guaranteed. In this particular case, customer assessments of flight attendant aesthetics entail a hyper-heteronormative, hegemonically masculine evaluation of the performance of a clichéd femininity<sup>vi</sup>, one that is effectively recycled in this advert through its knowingly and self-consciously retrospective reversal of feminist politics and achievements.

#### Concluding thoughts

A critical understanding of interactive service work in consumer culture, of embodying the brand (Pettinger, 2004; Waring, 2011), demands recognition of how consumption processes and the expectations and behaviours of customers shape the way work is performed and experienced, including the performance of marketing work and the management of customer expectations through visual rhetoric. We can read in this advertising campaign an encoding of the service transaction that promises service workers who offer their full, embodied gendered subjectivity to the market through their corporeal commitment to the work, the organization and the customer; these women are not working as flight attendants, they *are* flight attendants – living dolls, to evoke Walter's (2010) critique of the pornographic objectification of women, such that their labour process is negated. The post-feminist narrative of free choice, irony and self objectification through which their story is told within this advertisement precludes meaningful critique of this process and its discriminatory effects, as indicated by the social media responses to the advert discussed above.

Indeed, a serious critique of such a seemingly playful imagery, successful as it was within its own terms, suffused with irony and apparently dedicated to reclaiming women's sexual subjectivity seems 'heavy handed' by comparison (McRobbie, 2004). But more than this, a

specifically feminist critique is implicitly positioned as not only disingenuous and unreflexive, but anachronistic in relation to such a self-consciously post-feminist text. Either way, the possibility of critical engagement is undermined. As suggested above, underpinning this advert is a stylized undoing of feminism and femininity, the latter in all its embodied, lived complexity. To us, this remains deeply troubling, not least because the whole process appears to be such fun, and so attractive, for the women themselves who knowingly abandon themselves to essentialism and objectification.

In various ways then, for all its espoused emphasis on sexual freedom and empowerment, the imagery contained within the advertisement evokes a highly constraining normative relationship between sex, gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990), with each embedded in a presentation of the body as a signifier of a viable and legible, marketable organisational subject. It is within this context that such images, as Borgerson and Schroeder (2002) have argued, can be said to occupy a realm that is not simply that of a brand communicator or consumer code, but rather what they also identify as a liminal zone between self and other which 'performs identity' in purely commercial terms. In this sense, cultural texts such as *Still Red Hot* function as a symbolic and aesthetic space within which those idealized practices and presentations of self upon which phenomenological processes of recognition and intersubjectivity are in turn based, can come into being. But this coming into being is conditional; in this instance, women's freedom is dependent upon them embracing and embodying the motifs of post-feminist described by Gill (2007) above. As also noted above, this provides the basis for a 'practically limitless' (Böhme, 2003) exploitation, all in the name of playful, retro-irony and post-feminist chic.

What this suggests, to us at least, is that advertisements such as these can be understood as performative mediations of the process of becoming commodifiable organizational subjects, configured in accordance with particular, organizationally compelled ways of being and doing gender; they are a way of 'doing gender unto the Other', as Czarniawska (2006) has put it. In this respect, capitalism's 'control of the signifier' (Carter and Jackson, 2004: 113) can be discerned as it works, in this case very successfully, towards an ideological eradication of its inherent tensions and contradictions, in this instance, between an industry that continues to exploit and objectify, and a narrative of choice that simultaneously glamorizes and essentializes women and the work involved. In effect, this produces what Borgerson (2005: 69) has described as 'alienating iterations [that] infect intersubjectivity and the potential for

mutual recognition', in this particular case, positioning women in an aesthetic competition with each other for recognition of their desiring subjectivity and their desirable bodies, at the same time as presenting a corporate image of women as a collective (see in particular the scene in which the flight attendants walk into the airport Arrivals lounge en masse.) This means that, as strategic interventions into the perpetual process of becoming a gendered subject at work, mediations that seek to integrate human being and human doing on organizational terms, texts such as *Still Red Hot* can be construed as attempts to limit levels of mutual recognition that depend upon a culturally attuned recognition of a very particular version of idealized subjectivity. In this example, these are hyper-heteronormative narratives of choice and aspiration that produce and disseminate the retrogressive characteristics of post-feminism as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Gill, 2007) considered above. In this sense, this advert, much like post-feminism itself, relies upon a contrived process of misrecognition, and a corporate co-optation of the latter's unreflexive assumptions and naïve aspirations. It is designed to ensure that the emergence of the gendered subject is configured so as to result in a particular sense of aesthetic self-consciousness and sexual subjectification, the attainment of which appears to be only possible through brand identification.

In sum, our analysis has emphasized coalescences between post-feminism and contemporary corporate culture, specifically considering the implications of this link for employment practices in the airline industry that underplay the performance of labour, emphasizing instead an individual's capacity to experience work as pleasure and play, a theme that downplays collective experiences of discrimination and disadvantage. This means that serious critique of the continued practice of recruiting and selecting those employed in interactive service work on the basis of a narrowly prescriptive range of appearance norms that position women as 'living dolls' (Walter, 2010) is framed as outmoded and ironic, given the free choice narrative by which adverts such as these are presumed to be underpinned. Further, and returning to Gill's (2007) critique of the ways in which a post-feminist cultural sensibility depends largely upon the shift from a sexual objectification to a subjectification of women, the latter arguably constitutes a 'deeper form of exploitation' (Gill, 2007: 152), as women are invited, in the case of the advertisement considered here, in order to qualify as viable organizational subjects, to become 'a particular kind of self, and are endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography' (see also Walter, 2010). In a post-equality

environment (Mills, 2006) the latter would of course be subject to critique; what retro-marketing (Brown, 2001) lends to this process of subjectification is a veneer of irony that precludes serious engagement or collective opposition. Instead, as Gill (2007) herself notes, the sexual prude, the 'jealous competitor', or the aesthetically unemployable outsider, are the only alternative subject positions that are permitted within this frame of cultural reference; yet within the terms of this frame, it is only young, conventionally beautiful and slim women, who desire sex with men, who are constructed as empowered and desiring. Hence only these women are positioned as commercially and sexually desirable organizational subjects, only they are encoded as 'red hot'. Once we suspend the rhetoric of retro in our appraisal of this positioning we are left with a fast-growing area of corporate culture that is 'chilling' (Gill, 2007: 160) in its mobilization of playful irony and in its resonance with post-feminist sensibilities. We have considered some of the ways in which this is the case in one particular advertisement, in a very particular industry. More work needs to be done to consider, and to develop a sustained critique of, the growing links between post-feminism and contemporary corporate culture, and to reflect on the ways in which corporate cultural texts such as these, serve to preclude critique of the misrecognition they perpetuate.

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<sup>i</sup> We argue that it is important to consider not simply the content of the advertisement, and the intended meanings and associations that seem to have been encoded into it, but also the ways in which the broader socio-cultural context of the advertisement, and responses to it, shape perceptions of idealized, gender subjectivity. Our concern, in this respect, is to understand how gendered perceptions and performances are shaped by the inter-relationship between organizational imagery and its broader social context.

<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, as Tasker and Negra (2005) have noted, existing scholarship on post-feminist media culture tends to focus largely on romantic comedies, sitcoms and literature orientated towards a homogenized female audience, so that resonances between post-feminism and corporate culture have been relatively neglected to date.

<sup>iii</sup> Studies of organizational documentation as data sources in their own right remain, with a handful of notable exceptions (Swales and Rogers, 1995; Connell and Galasinski, 1998; Harper, 1998), relatively rare. Yet it seems that one of the main reasons why documents have largely been overlooked as ‘serious’ sources of data is their apparently mundane nature and cultural ubiquity (Harper, 1998). As Taylor and Hansen (2005: 1227) have commented however, aesthetic phenomena are only ‘mundane’ in so far as they are so profoundly ingrained and unquestioned that they seem ‘so routinely ordinary’.

<sup>iv</sup> Our analysis carries with it of course, the risk of ‘over-reading’ corporate documentation not simply in terms of the attribution of meaning to the texts themselves, but also in relation to their performative effects. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 621) put it in this respect, ‘organizational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities’. Yet see also Dutton et al (1994: 239) who have argued that ‘members vary in how much they identify with their work organization. When they identify strongly with the organization, the attributes they use to define the organization also define them’.

<sup>v</sup> This advert is widely available to view via various links online, including:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cM4EOeJzHA>

<sup>vi</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between gender normativity and cabin crew work, see Simpson (2014).