

FLIGHT ATTENDANT PORTRAYALS IN THE MEDIA:

THE IMPACT ON INFLIGHT SECURITY

The mass media love a flight attendant story, especially if there is a sexual twist to it. Consequently, many campaigners and employers are keen to condemn the continued stereotypical portrayal of a flight attendant as an object of sexual desire. A generation ago, already in a supposedly more enlightened era, Britney Spears' video, which accompanied her single 'Toxic', caused ripples of concern within the industry. Yet it's a cliché, which both Hollywood and the advertising industry – as the latest Netflix film '365 DNI' and the Australian lingerie firm Honey Birdette's 'Turbulence' campaign respectively demonstrate – continue to promulgate.

Alexandra James weighs up whether such imagery should really be of concern and results in flight attendants not being regarded as the safety and security professionals that they are. She further questions whether the flight attendant community itself is equally culpable for denigrating its professional image given the litany of videos appearing on social media.





Back in May, the editor of Aviation Security International sent me a link to a new advert for Australian lingerie company, Honey Birdette, entitled 'Turbulence'. He posed a seemingly simple question: did I think it should be included in 'Air Watch', the journal's summary of aviation security related incidents? In case you haven't seen the video, it features stunningly beautiful, scantily clad female passengers passing through pre-flight screening and, once on board an HBA (presumably 'Honey Birdette Airlines') flight, being 'served' by equally beautiful but marginally more clothed female flight attendants who seem to enjoy their jobs very, very much. At one point, the action moves into the cockpit as a gorgeous female pilot leads one of the scantily clad ladies away from the passenger cabin for further in-flight entertainment – no sterile flight deck here.

The video sparked outrage among the cabin crew community, with many claiming it perpetuates the unrealistic stereotype of flight attendants as promiscuous sexual objects, and contributes to the very real issue of sexism and sexual abuse that occurs against crew in the skies every day. Now, while I am not a member of cabin crew and so do not face the same challenges, as a woman working in the aviation security industry, I do feel a certain solidarity with this group, of which approximately 78% are female (according to pre-COVID-19 stats). So why do I not feel outraged by this video? Aside from being gratified to see an apparently fairly robust passenger screening process being conducted at the start (admittedly, the passenger's lack of clothing helps), I believe it has something to do with the fact that the video is so over-the-top, so stylised, so slick and so obviously a product of fantasy that no sane person could ever equate it with reality. Could they?

Moving away from aviation for a moment, the impacts of certain tropes promulgated by pop culture, advertising and pornography on

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certain professions is a well-studied phenomenon. Take nursing for example; numerous studies have shown that nurses are negatively impacted by the pressure exerted on them by the constant representation of nurses in media as endlessly caring, sensitive (and sexual) individuals, always willing to tend to the emotional, as well as physical side of illness. In reality, of course, hospitals are busy places, many are understaffed and nurses are underpaid, and so efficiency and order are key characteristics in the nursing profession (of course, that's not to say nurses aren't sensitive or caring!). There is, therefore, evidence that such hyper-sexualised stereotypes may negatively impact upon flight attendants, too. However, the majority of people can appreciate a trope for what it is without allowing it to negatively influence their behaviour. Most people don't really believe they're likely to receive a sexy sponge bath from an NHS nurse after their appendectomy. But, as with most things in life, there are always exceptions; there will always be one who believes that they should be treated to the same kind of service offered by Honey Birdette Airlines during their next Virgin Atlantic/Thai Airways/Emirates flight. But, on the flip side, as we know from certain viral social media photos and videos, there is also the odd flight attendant for whom the trope may not be quite so unrealistic.

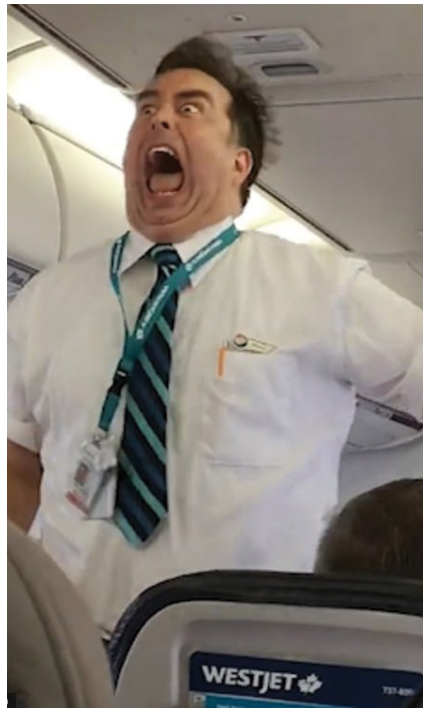
Honey Birdette, an Australian lingerie company, produced a marketing video entitled 'Turbulence' which included scenes on board an aircraft and at an airport security checkpoint. (Credit: Honey Birdette)



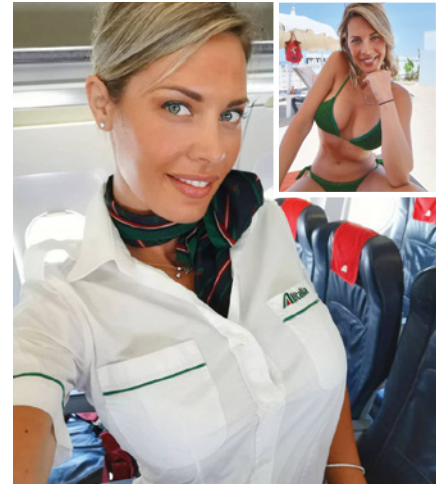
"...Folks, that seatbelt needs to be low and tight across your hips," he declares, "just like the hot pink speedo I'm gonna be wearing when we get to the hotel hot tub tonight in Manchester..."



In 2015, this Southwest Airlines flight attendant went viral following his pre-flight safety briefing (Credit: Newsflare)



This 4 July 2019 flight safety briefing on a WestJet flight was also a comic routine that went viral (Credit: Facebook)



Laura D'Amore, an Alitalia flight attendant, is often referred to as "the world's most followed air hostess" and has an Instagram following of over 680,000 (Credit: Instagram / @lauradamore.)

We cannot ignore the fact that crew are the faces of their airlines, even more so today than ever before given the ubiquitous nature of camera phones and social media. We know that the very nature of the cabin crew role attracts outgoing, flamboyant individuals – and it is these people that make the civil aviation industry great. However, some crewmembers are all too ready to put on a show for their (literally) captive audience. The use of comedy during an inflight safety demo, for example, does have the benefit of maintaining passengers' attention during what is otherwise quite a dry but necessary procedure. British Airways have very successfully used such an approach in their new pre-flight safety video,

which features various British celebrities 'auditioning' with British comedian Asim Chaudhry playing the dim and rather inappropriate director. Admittedly some of the jokes only work if you are familiar with British culture, but generally it's a great example of comedy being used effectively and appropriately without negatively impacting on the professional image of the crew.

However, there has been a recent trend for crew to devise their own comic renditions of safety demonstrations. One example springs to mind: in a video captured by a passenger on St. Patrick's Day, a male cabin crewmember wears a headband featuring two high green ponytails while he delivers the safety briefing: "Folks, that seatbelt

needs to be low and tight across your hips," he declares, "just like the hot pink speedo I'm gonna be wearing when we get to the hotel hot tub tonight in Manchester..." Now, I'm not going to pretend otherwise, watching the video, I, apparently along with all of the passengers on board that particular flight, was riveted by this crewmember's extraordinary loquaciousness; there is no denying that everyone was listening to the safety briefing. However, when it comes to issuing instructions, maintaining order on board – perhaps dealing with an unruly passenger incident – and generally ensuring the safety and security of the flight, one has to wonder whether this performance actually does more harm than good. And when it comes to impacting upon the professional image of cabin crew, could this very real video released on social media do more damage than the fanciful Honey Birdette lingerie advert?



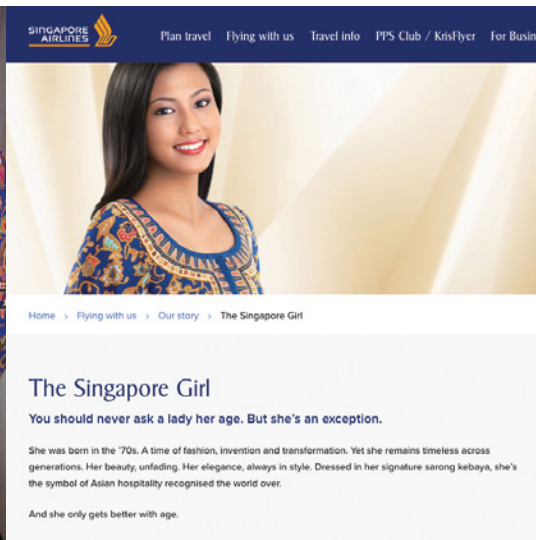
British Airways brings together a collection of Britain's most-admired celebrities to create a humorous flight safety video, while also helping customers take in important safety information. The video promotes Flying Start, the global charity partnership between British Airways and Comic Relief. (Credit: British Airways)

In addition to how crew are presented on flights, we should also be thinking about how crew are represented in media released by airlines and crewmembers themselves. For example, one female Alitalia crewmember has attracted quite a following on social media (currently in excess of 680k on Instagram alone) by posting photos of herself in her uniform while at work, as well as bikini shots while off-duty. In interviews with press, she suggests that her role as an 'air hostess' has contributed to her popularity online and she claims that she is often recognised during flights. Of course, crew must be free to lead their personal lives however they wish, but on social media there seems to be a tendency for the line between personal and professional lives to become blurred, which can impact not just on public perceptions of the individual in question, but on the entire community that that individual represents (in this case, the cabin crew community).

Additionally, many crewmembers, as well as airlines themselves, are known to post increasingly popular make-up tutorials demonstrating how to achieve that 'flight attendant look'. While there is nothing wrong with this per se – crew grooming has always been an important aspect of the commercial side of aviation – one can't help but feel that the value some airlines place on their crewmembers' image (take, for example, Singapore Airlines' frankly out-dated and sexist notion of the 'Singapore Girl') only reinforces the hyper-sexualised stereotype and significantly detracts from the professional image that crew deserve as safety and security professionals.

And it's not just airlines' sexualisation of crew that is problematic. Many of the budget airlines are known to view their crew's interactions with passengers as sales opportunities, placing cabin crew in the position of duty-free sales reps. This significantly impacts on the passenger/crew relationship on board and, ultimately, on passengers' perceptions of the crew role.

In reality, we're never going to control how the media represents our personnel (and would we really want to?). What we can control is how cabin



Whilst this image of Singapore Airlines crew emanates from 2011, Singapore Girl is still part and parcel of the airline's marketing campaign and even warrants space on the carrier's website. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Rita Franz)

crew are presented on our flights and in our marketing and advertising. As we well know, perceptions matter, especially in the field of security where they can influence decision-making and help deter negative behaviour. For this reason, it is vital that the media released by airlines and passengers' real-life experiences of cabin crew are in keeping with the important role they play as safety and security professionals.

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So, if you are a member of cabin crew who is sick and tired of being the subject of inappropriate remarks and/or behaviour while you work and you were offended by the Honey Birdette advert, I do understand. However, take a moment to consider how your work environment may allow that kind of behaviour to take place at all. In other words, can we really just blame media? I don't think so. I believe airlines may be equally culpable and significant changes need to be made to ensure that cabin crew are respected and supported in their place of work. This involves considering the realities of the

cabin crew job in advertising and social media campaigns, while conducting crew communication training, while designing crew uniform, and, more generally, in implementing a company culture, including guidelines relating to individuals' online (and offline) behaviour while in crew uniform.

As the industry 're-boots' in the wake of a global pandemic, we are presented with a unique opportunity and an important decision to make: do we really want everything to go back to how it was? Or, perhaps more importantly, can we afford for things to be as they were? In addition to the usual safety and security concerns, crew now have biosecurity measures to enforce. It seems to me that the least we can do to support them in their challenging role is to ensure we present them in an appropriate and professional light.

Oh, and in case you were wondering: yes, the cabin crew community's response to the Honey Birdette advert was included in Aviation Security International's 'Air Watch' as an incident that impacted on aviation security. ■

Alexandra James is a researcher and trainer for Green Light and the sub-editor of ASI. She also recently completed a Master's degree in Forensic Linguistics at Cardiff University.

