

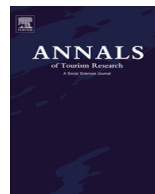


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‘Up in the air’: A conceptual critique of flying addiction



Martin Young^{a,*}, James E.S. Higham^{b,1}, Arianne C. Reis^a

^a School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University, Australia

^b Department of Tourism, University of Otago, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

The ‘flyers’ dilemma’, where an individual’s self-identity as an environmentally-responsible consumer conflicts with the environmental impacts of frequent air travel, has been shown to produce a range of negative psychological effects. Some have argued that frequent flying may represent a site of behavioural addiction, characterized by guilt, suppression and denial. While this sort of pathologisation finds parallels in other forms of excessive consumption, its application in a tourist context is problematic in terms of classification validity, attribution of negative consequences, transfer of responsibility, and tendency towards social control and domination. We argue for an alternative conceptual approach to frequent flying which elaborates the structural reproduction of the ‘flyers’ dilemma’, rather than its individual, psychological effects.

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Introduction

At present, there are more people flying, and flying more frequently, than at any time before in human history (Gössling & Upham, 2009). Air travel has become an affordable, everyday consumer product; one that offers personal aeromobility to a widening range of social classes (Randles & Mander, 2009a). These new freedoms are enjoyed at a cost. In particular, the environmental impacts

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: martin.young@scu.edu.au (M. Young), james.higham@otago.ac.nz (J.E.S. Higham), arianne.reis@scu.edu.au (A.C. Reis).

¹ Visiting Professor, University of Stavanger, Norway.

of frequent flying are now widely recognised (cf. Gössling, 2009; Higham, Cohen, Peeters & Gössling, 2013; IPCC, 2013). Ironically, it is the middle-classes, who tend to be the most environmentally-aware (Leviston, Leitch, Greenhill, Leonard, & Walker, 2011; Princen, Maniates, & Conca, 2002), who are also the most frequent flyers (Randles & Mander, 2009b). This contradiction produces an inevitable clash between the self-identity of the 'environmentally-responsible consumer' and the material-environmental impacts of air travel, a problematic termed the 'flyers' dilemma' in the popular media (Rosenthal, 2010). In a provocative paper, Cohen, Higham, and Cavaliere (2011) argue that this dilemma, and the cognitive dissonance it represents (Festinger, 1962; Thøgersen, 2004), is often manifested in the form of guilt and anxiety on the part of affected flyers. They further argue that these negative emotions, along with associated suppression and denial, are the same as those experienced by behavioural addicts. In this way, Cohen et al. (2011) reframe air travel as a pathological form of consumption, one that may be likened to the consumption of other dangerous commodities such as alcohol and tobacco. Indeed, these authors argue that their empirical research explicitly supports what they describe as an emergent 'counter-narrative' to frequent tourist air travel, one that positions air travel as a site of mass behavioural addiction rather than a socially-desirable form of leisure consumption.

In this essay, we take issue with the application of a behavioural addiction framework in the context of consumption generally, and frequent flying specifically. We argue that while the conceptual lens of behavioural addiction may be seductive to some (cf. Hill, 2007), it is, in contrast to the position of Cohen et al. (2011), ultimately counterproductive to the development of a meaningful critical response to the question of frequent flying and environmental damage. In a technical sense, the notion of behavioural addiction is problematic when applied in the context of flying for reasons we elaborate below. More generally, we are concerned that the deployment of the behavioural addict trope, while useful in an attention-getting, provocative sense, presents a complex, historical and systemic effect of global capital as a narrow, individual, psychological issue. This conceptual approach at best downplays, and at worst completely ignores, the fundamental socio-structural causes of frequent flying. A theoretical approach that emphasizes psychological deviance and disorder at the expense of the social, institutional and economic forces that produce excessive consumption in the first place only serves to reproduce the dilemma it seeks to analyse. In terms of political-economy, the dressing-up of a complex social issue created by the emergence of a consumer society as the failings of the undisciplined, irrational and excessive subject (i.e. the lens of addiction) allows capital to reproduce itself by discursively presenting solutions to the problems it has produced, and to apportion blame with the 'flawed consumer' (Bauman, 2007). In short, the flying addict construct, if popularised, actually plays into the hands of an environmentally destructive industry by allowing it to legitimate its practices while simultaneously absolving itself from responsibility for the environmental destruction from which it profits. From this perspective, Cohen et al. (2011) are asking the wrong question. Rather than asking "is frequent flying a behavioural addiction?" we need to ask "why is the 'flyers' dilemma' necessary for the reproduction of the global tourism industry in its contemporary form?" This reorientation demands an alternative conceptual approach to the analysis of frequent flying, one that elaborates the structural causes and historical contexts of the 'flyers' dilemma', rather than its individual psychological effects.

The phenomenon of frequent flying

Low-cost, high-volume air travel has grown dramatically over the past several decades. The global fleet of aircraft with a minimum of 100 seats, estimated at 13,300 in 2007, is projected by Airbus Industries to increase to 28,550 by 2026 (Holloway, Humphreys, & Davidson, 2009). In the UK alone, air travel has increased five-fold in 30 years. It is forecast to grow from 200 million journeys in 2003 to 400 million in 2020, reaching 500 million journeys by 2030 (Ryley, Davison, Bristow, & Pridmore, 2010). This pattern of growth, now well established across Europe, is being mirrored in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), and other emergent capitalist economies (e.g. Mexico, South Africa, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Nigeria). Indeed, the largest single purchase of aircraft in the 95-year history of Boeing Aircraft Corporation was confirmed by Lion Air, Indonesia,

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