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The dark side of business travel: A media comments analysis

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ABSTRACT

The publication of 'A darker side of hypermobility' (Cohen and Gössling, 2015), which reviewed the personal and social consequences of frequent travel, led to considerable media coverage and sparking of the public imagination, particularly with regards to the impacts of business travel. It featured in more than 85 news outlets across 17 countries, engendering over 150,000 social media shares and 433 media comments from readers, with the latter a source of insight into how the public reacts online when faced with an overview of the negative sides of frequent business travel. The present paper is theoretically framed by the role of discourse in social change and utilises discursive analysis as a method to evaluate this body of media comments. Our analysis finds two key identities are performed through public responses to the explicit health and social warnings concerned with frequent business travel: the 'flourishing hypermobile' and the 'floundering hypermobile'. The former either deny the health implications of frequent business travel, or present strategies to actively overcome them, while the latter seek solace in the public dissemination of the health warnings: they highlight their passivity in the construction of their identity as hypermobile and its associated health implications. The findings reveal a segment of business travellers who wish to reduce travel, but perceive this as beyond their locus of control. Business travel reductions are thus unlikely to happen through the agency of individual travellers, but rather by changes in the structural factors that influence human resource and corporate travel management policies.

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1. Introduction

Travelling fast, far and frequently is increasingly common in contemporary societies. Such hypermobility is typically tied to affluence, which affords the power to move, and materialises in corporeal movements such as frequent business travel and leisure trips, lifestyle migration or visits to spatially dispersed friends and relatives. In contrast to approaches that have focused on the environmental impacts of hypermobility (e.g. Shaw and Thomas, 2006), a parallel but fragmented body of literature exists, dispersed across multiple disciplines, that ties frequent travel to negative health and wellbeing implications. A recent paper by Cohen and Gössling (2015), entitled 'A darker side of hypermobility' draws upon a range of interdisciplinary secondary material to synthesise the extant literature on the negative consequences of frequent business and leisure travel into three sides: physiological; psychological & emotional; and social. It argued that these 'costs' tend to be overshadowed in society by the popular representation in discourse of travel as glamorous. Travel is glamorised by a range

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of social mechanisms, such as visualisations on social media that encourage mobility competition, frequent flyer programme status levels and the mass media and travel industry who depict tourism and business travel as desirable (Cohen and Gössling, 2015).

'A darker side of hypermobility' received significant media coverage, with journalists honing in on its discussion of the negative consequences of business travel. Within three months of the publication of the paper in August 2015, it had received coverage in 85 news outlets across 17 countries, engendering over 150,000 shares on social media. It can consequently be argued that the paper engendered a sparking of the public imagination. The direct media coverage generated 433 comments from readers (August-October 2015), which are in themselves a potential source of rich insight into how the public reacts online when faced with an overview of the negative sides of frequent business travel. The media comments presented an opportunity to explore the ways in which people negotiate and respond to explicit physical, psychological, and social health warnings surrounding hypermobility. The present paper employs discourse analysis to evaluate and discuss this corpus of media comments. In doing so, it contributes to the broader research problem of whether and how health and wellbeing concerns may offer a more effective evidence base to stimulate reductions in travel than environmental arguments, and indeed, whether the dual agendas can act in synergy. Shaw and Thomas (2006) viewed the reluctance among the hypermobile to travel less as a classic example of the 'tragedy of the commons', i.e. their 'sacrifice' would be perceived as useless if not followed by others. It is therefore important to understand if and how the more direct or 'internal' health and wellbeing consequences of frequent travel, as opposed to just the 'external' environmental costs, might provide greater leverage in stimulating behavioural transitions.

The paper next turns to a review of the negative personal costs of frequent business travel and the role of discourse in social change, before introducing the methodology, which includes discussion of user-generated content as data and the paper's method of discourse analysis. The focus then turns to presentation and discussion of the empirical findings, centring on the discursive strategies and identity work that were revealed, and which locates individuals through two key subject positions: the 'flourishing hypermobile' and the 'floundering hypermobile'. The paper concludes by considering the implications of the discourses that were uncovered, not only in terms of the potential for issues of wellbeing to provide leverage for reducing hypermobility among some frequent business travellers, but also the structural level at which interventions for change are likely to be most fruitful.

2. The dark side of business travel

It is necessary at a contextual level to summarise the evidence base on the costs of frequent business travel that Cohen and Gössling (2015) provided, which requires disentangling their discussion of business travel from that of leisure travel, as the online comments that form the data for this paper were a direct response to media reporting on the business travel aspects of their study. Before doing so, it is crucial to recognise that the popular discourse on business travel overwhelmingly constructs it as a prestigious and glamorous activity (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006), and that there is substantial academic discourse that draws attention to positive aspects of business travel. For instance, benefits to business travellers are alleged to include enhanced professional status, a broadened understanding of cultural differences, the development of cosmopolitan identities and increased open-mindedness (Beaverstock et al., 2009; Gustafson, 2014). Thurlow and Jaworski (2006: 124) argue however that the discourse of cosmopolitanism through travel 'is one of many liberal discourses which run through the mythology of globalization', in which airline and lifestyle advertising 'talk' or 'write' the notion of the global citizen into existence, as a model or 'mythic identity' that 'persuade us to spend and consume'.

Although academic studies have given emphasis to both the benefits and negative effects of frequent business travel (e.g. Gustafson, 2014; Tretyakevich, 2015), the latter are in contrast far less prominent in public discourse, despite the significant academic discourse that does exist on the 'darker sides' of business travel (e.g. Bergström, 2010; Black and Jamieson, 2007). Frequent business travellers have been shown to incur social psychological costs at kinship, friendship and community levels (Cohen and Gössling, 2015). Isolation and loneliness is a frequently reported experience, both for the traveller and those left behind at home (Gustafson, 2014). The geographically dispersed connections that business travellers often make through work tend to come at the expense of ties at local and community scales (Gustafson, 2014). Even with advances in communication technologies, there is an association between frequent business travel and less time for co-present social life at home (Bergström, 2010). The traveller's family role may be reduced by repeated absence from key family events, such as birthdays, and the quality of time spent at home may be degraded by the limited time there being spent on recovering from fatigue before the next trip (Black and Jamieson, 2007).

Business travel is a traditionally male sphere (Bergström Casinowsky, 2013), and as such it is heavily gendered (Aguiléra, 2008; Gustafson, 2006). Households with a male frequent business traveller often also include a 'stay at home' wife who is prevented from engaging in some dimensions of the labour market due to domestic constraints (Black and Jamieson, 2007). In cases where women are both frequent travellers and mothers, they are under pressure from others, and themselves, to fulfil the role of mother while away (Black and Jamieson, 2007; Bergström Casinowsky, 2013).

Beyond these social and psychological consequences that Cohen and Gössling (2015) reviewed, their paper identified a range of physiological costs from frequent business travel that are rarely discussed. With business travel characterised by short trips, by car or train, but often by airplane, it is in cases where frequent air travel is involved that the array of threats

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