Consumer attitudes to flying and sustainability: gateways and barriers to behavioural change

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Sources of evidence

- Observations today based on:
  - Collaborative empirical study with Professor James Higham (University of Otago, NZ) on UK consumer attitudes to air travel and climate change
    - part of a wider qualitative study in European consumer markets
  - Secondary data from the media and academic literature

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Consumer attitudes to air travel and climate change

- Several UK studies have focused in this area
- Attitudes and perceptions more widely explored than behavioural adaptations
- UK studies present conflicting evidence ranging from:
  - denial of personal responsibility (Hares et al, 2010)
  - reluctance to take fewer holidays (Miller et al, 2010)
  - growing evidence of air travel decisions taken with a '**carbon conscience**' (Cohen & Higham, 2011)

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Explanations for conflicting evidence

- These studies look at different cross-sections of society
  - Our work – with relatively affluent and well-educated
  - Others studies have gauged consumers of lower affluence and education levels - typically one holiday per year
- Willingness to sacrifice holidays when having the luxury of multiple per year
- Consumer climate concern over air travel appears to **vary in relation to income and education**

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Barriers to behavioural change

Flying is socially embedded

- Air travel from an extraordinary event to the domain of the everyday as a 'locked-in' social institution (Randles & Mander, 2009)
  - Social connections ever-more networked and spatially 'stretched out'
  - Air travel is embedded in social life in new ways – events that would have in the past been held locally (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries, hen/stag nights)
  - Tourism increasingly coupled (and masked) with VFR and/or business

Attitude – behaviour gaps

- Increasing evidence of awareness of air travel's climate impact and even attitudes of concern over these impacts

- Dissonance between environmental attitudes and actual steps to modify behaviour

- Attitude-behaviour gaps:
  - attitudes **do not** necessarily translate into specific behaviour across contexts (for instance home versus away)

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Why is leisure travel resistant to change?

- Climate concern in daily practices (e.g. reducing waste and energy use, buying 'ethical') may not carry over to holiday behaviour (Barr et al, 2010)

- Perceived benefits of tourism
  - Ideal of freedom firmly established in the minds of many tourists (Becken, 2007)
  - Tied in with notions of escape from everyday social commitments, behavioural norms and values

- Sense of freedom co-constructed through rapid expansion of low-cost airlines

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Excessive aeromobility

- Unbridled capitalism engendering new forms of **compulsive consumption** (Urry, 2010)
  - Stag weekends in Prague, clubbing trips to Berlin, shopping in Paris – low-cost airlines implicated not only by cheap (even free) prices, but also in (irresponsible?) advertising schemes
  - http://www.ryanairmag.com/story/bedless-in-berlin/874/1/
- Frequent flying still primarily the reserve of higher income and higher social class groups (Randles & Mander, 2009)

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Excessive aeromobility

- Despite claims of low-cost airlines to have made flying more accessible to poorer groups

- Not only short-haul – 'cash-rich and time-poor' consumers also flying long-haul more frequently –
  - e.g. weekend shopping in New York, city breaks in China or South Africa (Burns & Bibbings, 2009)

- 'Trophy tourism' – increasing performances of touring the world as collectors of places and ticking destinations off a mental list

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Gateways to behavioural change

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Changing social norms

- Growing evidence in academia and the media of a **shift** amongst (some) consumers towards a perception of frequent tourist air travel as socially unacceptable

- What initiatives can be used to further **nudge** wider social norms and, ultimately, mainstream habits of air travel behaviour?

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Short-haul travel in the crosshairs

- Our empirical work evidences a growing stigma surrounding **frequent short-haul flying**
  - Focused on brief intra-European tourist air trips

  - 'It's absolutely fine if people want to have an annual holiday, but the people who are flying 10 times a year, including nearly 6 weekend trips to Prague and Budapest and what have you, I think that's irresponsible behaviour.'

  - 'A lot of people think, oh I've got nothing to do this weekend, I'll just see what flights are available and go somewhere. It would not upset me if that part of travel all fell apart.'

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Behavioural addiction

- A broader behavioural change to sustainable air travel practices is partially dependent upon society repositioning high levels of consumption as destructive:

  - Number of behaviours seen as potentially addictive increasing - e.g. shopping, exercise, video games, overeating, sex, gambling

  - '**Binge flying**' - Mark Ellingham (Rough Guides) public's growing appetite for holidays - are the middle classes addicted to carbon-intensive leisure travel?

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Flyers' dilemma

- Tourist air travel as a site of behavioural addiction? (Cohen et al, 2011)
    - Destructive consequences dispersed globally rather than affecting contributing individuals directly
    - Short-term psychological gratifications and social benefits of leisure travel outweighing long-term climate consequences
- Or, do we increasingly see this tension negotiated in what has been termed **'flyers' dilemma'**? (Rosenthal, 2010)

Stigmatising 'excessive' air travel

- The term 'binge flying' itself epitomizes negative publicity being aimed at excessive or compulsive air travel (Burns & Bibbings, 2009)

  - Might airlines be putting themselves in a similar position to the tobacco industry?

- Behavioural addictions have 'normative ambiguity' – moderate use accepted but over-enactment condemned

  - Is climate concern changing what constitutes socially acceptable levels of flying?

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Ethical consumption

- Reconciling flyers' dilemma in favour of less flying can lead to redefining notions of a 'good citizen'

- Air travel with a 'carbon conscience' can be located within wider debates of lifestyle factors associated with ethical consumerism

- Backlash through social movements

  - 'New Puritans' - youngish, educated segment **reacting against** 4x4 use in cities, 'unfair' trade, processed food, and increasingly, air travel (Siegle, 2005)

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The cultural vanguard

- Repercussions of extending New Puritan values into mainstream society?

- 'Cultural intermediaries' or transmitters of ideas to a wider audience (Featherstone, 1987 on lifestyle and consumer culture)

  - Cultural vanguard – leading trends that push normative boundaries

  - Making hypermobility unstylish or anti-social

- The same groups that push these ethical movements also have a high uptake/use of social media

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Alternative practices

- UK consumers will still seek annual holidays, especially in warm destinations, but we should encourage:
  - Longer stays with less frequent trips
  - Holidaying closer to home and even -'staycations'
  - Modal shifts – slow travel via passenger ferry, train, coach
- In contrast to recent trends of travelling more frequently, for longer distances and for shorter stays
- Despite ethical movements against air travel, there is still a manifest reluctance to scale back tourist air travel on a significant scale

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Conclusions

- Air travel with a carbon conscience, paradoxically, is primarily associated with the relatively affluent and well-educated who have the resources to fly regularly themselves

- Flyers' dilemma - balancing act between the privileges of frequent air travel and awareness of its growing social stigmatisation

- Social norms surrounding acceptable levels of air travel are already shifting, with short-haul travel in the crosshairs

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Conclusions

- Direction this will go is an open empirical question as social attitudes rarely change overnight

- However, the youngish and well-educated, who are technologically proficient and have the resources to fly regularly, but may choose not to, are cultural intermediaries that can help drive social movements

- There is a gateway to influence behaviour through this group – the question today is whether social media may offer some headway?

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