Eco-anxiety and the flight shaming movement: implications for tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to briefly discuss the flight shaming (flygskam) movement and considers its implications for tourism.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper synthesises the current thinking on the flight shaming movement and contextualises it for tourism futures.

Findings – While flygskam is unlikely to become mainstream in the near future, it is imperative that the air travel industry respond more comprehensively to changing attitudes in the market.

Originality/value – This trends paper addresses a topical debate in the current environmental public discourse, highlighting the negative emotional states (eco-anxiety) associated with concerns about climate change.

Keywords Air travel, Eco-anxiety, Eco-guilt, Flight shaming, Flygskam, Train brag

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper briefly discusses the phenomenon of flygskam, a trend which emerged in the environmental movement in Sweden in 2018, suggesting that flying is a reprehensible act, in the face of the climate change crisis (Andersson, 2019). Benischke (2019) describes flygskam as the feeling of guilt over the environmental effects of flying. Flight shammers choose to cease flying and engage in activism to encourage others to do the same (Appel et al., 2019). Sweden has emerged as a leader in the movement, whereas in other Nordic countries, the movement has had minimal traction (Neergaard and Ravnbøl, 2019).

The movement conducts its activism in a variety of ways, including through social media. For example, Aningslösa Influencers (clueless influencers), or Ai for short, is a Swedish Instagram (IG) account with over 50,000 followers that orchestrates and facilitates conversations regarding climate change and environmentalism (Larsson, 2019). The anonymous account owner targets IG influencers who are viewed as normalising the excessive use of air travel in search of more IG content for their accounts (Larsson, 2019; Sundstedt, 2019). The offending influencer is interrogated on their travelling habits, and if they fail to respond, they are named and shamed publicly (Larsson, 2019). This trend clearly has important implications for tourism as we know it.

A closely related trend is “train brag” (tågskryt), where people encourage one another to travel by train rather than flying, then posting pictures from their rail journeys using the hashtag #tågskryt on social media. As more people start to question the sustainability of air travel (Larsson, 2019), there is a possibility that flygskam and tågskryt will become more widespread.

Reay (2008) argues that misinformation and unsupported statements abound on both sides of the climate change debate. There is nonetheless an emerging understanding of the various ways in which the climate change threat, whether it is real or not, may create
emotional distress and anxiety about the future (Fritze et al., 2008). The climate change activist, Greta Thunberg, embodies the anxiety among many young people who are worried that not enough is being done to combat climate change (Tucker, 2019).

Related studies have broached the subject of eco-anxiety, a term which describes the various difficult emotions and mental states induced by environmental conditions and knowledge about them (Pihkala, 2018). Nobel (2007, p. 1) notes that “a growing number of people have literally worried themselves sick over a range of doomsday scenarios”. Other scholars refer to “eco-angst” (Hågvar, 2013; Pihkala, 2018), “eco-fear” (Hågvar, 2013), “eco-guilt”, “climate grief” and “environmental grief”, all of which capture the various negative emotions associated with the climate change phenomenon. Some commenters view this anxiety as not unexpected or irrational, while others dismiss it as the result of misinformation (Doulton and Brown, 2009; Fritze et al., 2008; Nobel, 2007).

Unwarranted doom mongering?

Clark (2019) notes that the feelings of despair and powerlessness have become common, affecting both individuals and communities (Pihkala, 2018). This trend might be explained by the fear-inducing representations of climate change which are widely employed in the public domain, as O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) observe. Images of extreme weather events are also frequently shared in social media, often in connection to the climate change discourse (Carvalho, 2007; Costello et al., 2011; Doulton and Brown, 2009; O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

 Critics of the environmental movement view these notions as symptomatic of catastrophism and as “doom mongering” (Costello et al., 2011; Doulton and Brown, 2009; Reay, 2008), that is, of being overly pessimistic about climate change and its implications. Some of the blame for the growing anxiety has been attributed to scientists for failing to communicate effectively with the public about risks, so that low probability risks are blown out of proportion (Nobel, 2007).

The media is also viewed as responsible for some of the public anxiety over climate change, through its “language of alarmism”, arguably a deliberate strategy to increase the “newsworthiness” of their stories (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009, p. 358). Carvalho (2007) explains that like any other dimensions of reality, science is reconstructed and not merely reproduced in the media and that particular values and worldviews are produced, reproduced and transformed in media discourses, while others are excluded from them. As a result, consumers of news can find themselves overwhelmed with competing extreme, polarising messages.

Costello et al. (2011, p. 1867) argue, in view of modern eco-anxiety, that on the one hand it is important to counter climate change sceptics and denialsists. “but on the other it is also important not to allow climate catastrophists, who tell us it is all too late, to deflect us from pragmatic and positive action”. Fritze et al. (2008) similarly suggest that for the community to be less pessimistic about the future requires a realistic understanding of what climate change means and what can be done about it. Furthermore, understanding that the competing discourses we consume embody certain political and ideological standpoints will help the public to engage in “more active interpretation of representations of knowledge in the media and in a critical understanding of their implications” (Carvalho, 2007, p. 240).

Implications for tourism and future research

The climate change debate demonstrates aptly, as Carvalho puts it, that science is always contextual and contingent, bound by political, institutional and personal factors that are also often based on assumptions. This makes reflexivity critical to complex debates such as air travel and climate change. But what does all of this mean for tourism?
It may be argued that, whether or not the climate change discourse is subject to hyperbole or even fabrication, it is clear from the flight shaming movement that some people are at least rethinking their travel behaviour, either as a result of their own understanding, or as a social desirability response. At the same time, not all travellers succumb to flight shaming. Humans are creatures of habit, and will instinctively resist changing their behaviour. Indeed, studies show that while people may change their attitudes, for example through acquiring new knowledge, they very rarely change their behaviour substantially as a result – a case of the “attitude-behaviour gap” (Aschemann-Witzel and Niebuhr Aagaard, 2014; Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Hibbert et al., 2013; Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014). There are additional factors behind this resistance to change, including the convenience and increasing affordability of air travel (Marin-Pantelescu, 2016). At the same time, current alternatives to air travel, such as driving and sailing, are not always practical, or as convenient. Further, they might not necessarily be accepted by the public as “greener”. Nonetheless, there is an imperative on the air travel industry to respond more comprehensively to changing attitudes in the market.

Beyond the market implications, while flygskam is unlikely to become mainstream, air travellers may still be subject to the eco-guilt and other negative emotions induced by their choice to resist behavioural change, especially in the context of a growing shaming culture in some parts of the world. We therefore need significantly more research on the psychological and socio-cultural dynamics of climate change discourse. As younger people in particular grapple with the implications of climate change for their future, it is important to investigate and provide more evidence-based coping strategies to enhance their mental resilience.

For its part, the flight shaming movement would be more effective in discouraging air travel through more strategic messaging, pointing people to scientific evidence on the impact of air travel, rather than mere moralisation, or resorting to naming and shaming tactics. Moralisation is often dismissed as “virtue signalling” (Bartholomew, 2015), causing the audience to disconnect. A more positive messaging strategy would be less likely to elicit defensive and dismissive responses from the public.

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