

Opinion

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A Brief Critique of 'Flying Addiction'



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Opinion

Over the past decade there has been an increasing amount of research into various behavioural addictions. Research into gambling addiction has been longstanding and in 2013, 'gambling disorder' was reclassified in the latest (fifth) edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) from a disorder of impulse control to a behavioural addiction [1]. Given that gambling does not involve the ingestion of a psychoactive substance, the implication of the decision to reclassify gambling disorder as a behavioural addiction has huge theoretical implications in that it 'opens the floodgates' for almost any behaviour that has continual reinforcement and rewards to be pathologized if it causes serious long-term impairment to the individual. This has led to much research on areas such as addictions to videogames, the internet, exercise, work, sex, shopping, eating, and social networking [2].

The pathologizing of everyday behaviours has also led to papers being published on addictions diverse as dancing [3], fortune telling [4], and body image [5]. One of the more surprising activities that have been classed as a potential addiction in recent years is that of flying. For instance, Cohen, Higham and Cavaliere [6] proposed the idea of 'binge flying' and 'flying addiction' in the *Annals of Tourism Research*. This team of researchers has written various papers on flying, particularly the dilemma that many business travellers face in wanting to be 'green' and 'eco-friendly' but knowing that the amount of flying they are doing is contributing to climate change and leaving a 'carbon footprint' [7].

One of the papers published by Cohen and his colleagues [6] was entitled 'Binge flying: Behavioural addiction and climate change'. In their introduction to the topic, the authors referenced my 1996 paper in the *Journal of Workplace Learning* on behavioural addictions [8] to argue there was now evidence that many behaviours could be potentially addictive even without the ingestion of a psychoactive substance. They then went on to cite two press articles by Hill [9] and Rosenthal [10] that both implicated frequent tourist travel as an activity that could

constitute a behavioural addiction. They also noted that the severe negative consequences of flying addiction are different from more traditional behavioural addictions because the consequences do not affect the individual directly but impact at a societal level (i.e., the most negative effect is on global climate change). The term 'binge flying' was coined by Mark Ellingham (the founder of the *Rough Guides* to travel) in an interview *The Observer* British newspaper [9] and has since been cited in a number of academic papers [6,11,12].

They also used my 1996 paper [8] to make a number of points to support their premise that excessive flying can be conceptualized as an addiction. More specifically, they made reference to my observation that behavioural addictions comprise 'normative ambiguity' - the idea that moderate engagement in most behaviours is socially acceptable but that stigma can arise from engaging excessively and/or compulsively with the same behaviour (e.g., drinking alcohol, gambling, sex, work, etc.). In the same paper I also noted that although addictions are typically conceptualised in the psychological literature in purely negative terms, there were actually some benefits of addiction (or at the very least perceived benefits by the addicts themselves). These benefits (at least in the short-term) include the feelings of escape when engaged in the activity, the activity as a source of identity and meaning in their daily lives, and pleasurable mood changes from engaging in the activity (e.g., excitement, disinhibition, relaxation, etc.).

Based on my observations, Cohen et al. [6] claimed that excessive tourist air travel meets the basic criterion of behavioural addiction in that longer-term outlooks are sacrificed for immediate gratification (i.e., the short-term advantages override the long-term disadvantages). Cohen and colleagues then went on to argue that tourist experiences supply many of the psychological benefits that are common in behavioural addictions. To support their argument that flying can be an addiction, they assert there are three key characteristics that can be found in addictive behaviour that can be applied to flying:

- (i) A drive or urge to engage in the behaviour,
- (ii) A denial of the harmful consequences of the behaviour, and
- (iii) A failure in attempts to modify the behaviour. I operationally define addictive behaviour as comprising six components (salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse), and as such, flying would be unlikely to be classed as an addiction by my own criteria [13].

Cohen and colleagues interviewed 30 participants as part of their research but little of the qualitative data presented made any reference to addiction or elements of addictive behaviour. They concluded from these interviews that consumer discourses concerning excessive flying are (like addiction more generally) negative and that frequent flying and tourism consumption may be seen in the future as an addictive phenomenon. More specifically they claimed that: *"Frequent air travel may then join gambling, smoking, shopping, video games and Internet use... amongst others, as 'pathologised' sites of behavioural addiction that reflect society's (re)positioning of certain types of behaviour as socially dysfunctional"* (p.1088).

The concept of 'binge flying' and 'flying addiction' were more recently critiqued by Young, Higham and Reis [14], also in the *Annals of Tourism Research*. Their view closely matches my own view because they take issue that travel consumption (and specifically excessive flying) can be viewed within a behavioural addiction framework. Young et al. [12] argued that while behavioural addiction may *"be seductive to some"* (p.52) in relation to excessive flying it was *"ultimately counterproductive to the development of a meaningful critical response to the question of frequent flying and environmental damage"* (p.52). They also pointed out the irony that tourism is typically viewed as an activity associated with freedom, unconstraint, and abandon, and yet addiction is typically characterised as the complete opposite of these.

Young and colleagues' paper [14] asserts that the idea that flying in extreme cases could be classed as a behavioural addiction is *"unconvincing"* (p.57) and something that I agree with. The paper also adapts the 2013 DSM-5 criteria for gambling disorder (substituting the word 'gambling' with 'flying') to highlight that while it is theoretically possible for someone to have an addiction to flying, it is highly unlikely even amongst the most frequent of flyers. Hypothetically, they note flying addicts (if they exist) would be psychologically different from the frequent flyers that feel guilty about the environmental impact of their behaviour. They also note that while most addicts engage in irrational behaviour and have irrational thoughts, the feelings that frequent flyers experience (i.e., guilt about the consequences of frequent flying and impact on climate change) is arguably rational and no different to other behaviours that

have a negative impact on the environment (using plastic carrier bags when shopping, using coal-powered electricity, driving a car to and from work, etc.).

I concur with Young and colleagues [14] that excessive flying and the negative thoughts and feelings concerning it does not make similar to gambling disorder or internet gaming disorder listed in the DSM-5. Excessive flying is far more likely to be a function of one's occupation rather than a behaviour that becomes out of control, and even if the excessive flying is totally leisure-based, the flying is for the overwhelming majority of individuals simply a means to engaging in particular mood modifying experiences. As Young and colleagues argue, while the specific focus of behavioural addictions are clear (e.g., gambling, sex, exercise), this is not the case for flying.

Pathologizing behaviour like flying may be stretching the addiction analogy a little too far, although I do not see a theoretical reason why someone could not become addicted to flying. However, it is hard to see what the actual object of the addiction might be. Is it the actual flying and being in the air? The thrill of take-offs and landings? Is it the feeling of being attended and catered for (especially when flying business class) by the airline staff? Is it the anticipation associated of visiting somewhere new? All of these suggestions could be empirically tested but probably from a purely motivational view rather than from an addiction perspective.

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