

Green consumers flying in the face of environmental conviction

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In excess of 2.7 billion international air travellers a year render aviation the fastest growing transport sector. Flying has a high environmental impact and gives rising concerns for CO₂ emissions and [climate change](#). Nonetheless, there are few signs of changing behaviour even from committed environmentalists, many of whom continue to fly. Recent research in the *Journal of Marketing Management* studies the tensions between green principles and real actions. Authors McDonald et al ask what can be done by marketers to solve the contentious issue of green ethics and flying.

The authors conducted interviews with 29 environmentalists to gather first-hand accounts and qualitative data, with the objective of using insights to affect change in future [air travel](#) consumption.

Respondents were questioned in depth about their decision-making processes on travel purchases and a series of rationales emerged: despite their awareness of environmental damage and principles against flying, they faced unavoidable quandaries and produced justifications for air travel accordingly. The first was that alternatives can be time consuming, expensive and generally inconvenient with boats, buses and trains generally not considered to be practical options. Many justified air travel

by factors outside their control: far flung family, business, or an important event. Social identity emerged as a theme; life experiences and broadened horizons gained via travels are too important for even the committed green consumer to sacrifice.

On the other hand respondents discussed limiting numbers or types of flights, e.g. short haul and offsetting decisions to fly by other responsible behaviours to reduce carbon footprints like cycling to work, purchasing trees, or composting. By doing so they look to balance their behaviours and reinstate consistency with their ideals, a behaviour pattern that can surely be maximised to initiate further change.

Many alternative options to air travel are emerging: staycations, environmentally responsible slow travel, high speed rail links, and sophisticated video conferencing technologies. However, the challenging social norms still remain; it is more common to fly than to opt out on environmental grounds, and this is reflected in green consumers' refusal to go without. McDonald et al conclude: "If marketers are serious about changing consumers' unsustainable behaviours, they will have to tackle the [social norms](#) associated with them. Concepts drawn from the social psychology literature on cognitive dissonance have been shown to have applicability for explaining current (un)sustainable behaviours and in the hands of marketers could form the basis of long-term, coordinated marketing strategies for changing attitudes and even behaviours".

More information: Seonaidh McDonald et al. Flying in the face of environmental concern: why green consumers continue to fly, *Journal of Marketing Management* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2015.1059352](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2015.1059352)

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