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ABSTRACT

With international travel halting as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, several airlines sought to offer Flights to Nowhere as a way to generate revenue and keep their aircrafts flight-ready. Flights to Nowhere are sightseeing flights that start and finish at the same airport without landing elsewhere. These flights have been heavily criticized for creating unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions. This research explores the ethical decision-making process and the subsequent rationalization of taking Flights to Nowhere. Using cognitive dissonance theory and neutralization techniques, we analyse in-depth interviews with passengers that have recently taken a Flight to Nowhere. Passengers did not immediately make the connection between Flights to Nowhere and climate change but on reflection, they justified these flights using a range of neutralization techniques including an appeal to higher loyalties, denial of injury, and justification by comparison.

Introduction

Tourism, and particularly international air travel, have been severely curtailed since 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The closing of international borders and subsequent cessation of international travel saw airlines ground their planes. Numerous airlines went bankrupt (Skift, 2021). Many needed to be bailed out by their governments. At the same time, the growing emergency of climate change, triggered by anthropogenic activities, was highlighted at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26). Both existential issues highlight that individuals' ethical decisions impact not only their lives but the lives of others, the society and the nature. When individuals travel, a range of ethical decisions needs to be made that have consequences for sustainability. This research examines the ethical decision-making of taking a 'Flight to Nowhere', a sightseeing flight that starts and finishes at the same airport, amid climate change and a global pandemic. We explore the motivations and justifications for taking the flight from a traveller's perspective. As such, the research sheds light on the ethical decision-making process in travel and tourism, highlighting awareness-attitude-behaviour gaps surrounding sustainable behaviour. It demonstrates how individuals address ethical dilemmas amidst competing individual and societal interests and rationalize their choices. The moral dimensions of tourism and climate change have been identified as an important issue for investigation (Becken, 2013), which remains largely underexplored. While the study investigates a specific tourism product and at an extraordinary time of COVID-19 pandemic, its implications are valuable beyond this setting as ethics and sustainability will persist as important themes across tourism. Tribe and Liburd (2016) suggest that a plurality of approaches to tourism

knowledge creation should be encouraged. Tourism research should be nourished from a variety of disciplines and includes studies of varying scales with highly contextual and problem-based research also having its place within tourism knowledge system.

The pandemic was initially seen as an opportunity for a shift towards more sustainable tourism production and consumption (Milano & Koens, 2021). The pandemic offers an opportunity for a paradigm shift toward a more sustainable, environmentally-friendly mode of tourism. There is emerging evidence that the pandemic has resulted in a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions from tourism and has had some benefits for the environment (Nagaj & Žuromskaitė, 2021). A sustainable turn for tourism is not guaranteed and travel behaviour during the pandemic and at the early stages of recovery offers unique opportunities to better understand tourist ethical decision-making.

In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, most countries from around the world imposed severe restrictions on international travel starting from March 2020 (UNWTO, 2021). And yet, despite the seriousness of the virus and how contagious it is, evidence suggests that some segments of potential tourists are eager to start travelling again (Pinho et al., 2021). One way to satisfy travellers' need for the tourism experience and a means of generating income for airlines is offering 'Flights to Nowhere'. These flights have been offered in a range of different countries including Australia, Brunei, Fiji, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan. These trips have been very popular and booked out within minutes of being offered (Fortune, 2020). Yang et al. (2021) note that many publications related to tourism sustainability and COVID-19 are advocacy-driven rather than empirical. In such context, the present study provides important evidence of the ongoing challenge of addressing sustainability issues through tourism. In particular, while there was some hope for the tourism industry to reset after COVID-19 and 'build back better', the demand for Flights to Nowhere suggests some individuals' are either not aware or not strongly concerned about aviation's contribution to climate change.

Given the above, the objectives of this research are (1) to reveal why passengers take Flights to Nowhere, given that these flights do not arrive at a new destination, but contribute to passengers' carbon footprint; (2) to uncover how passengers reconcile taking a Flight to Nowhere with the implications the flight has for greenhouse gas emissions, and (3) to understand the awareness-attitude-behaviour gap in the case of Flights to Nowhere. We use the concept of cognitive dissonance and neutralization theory with which to understand this phenomenon.

Ethical decision-making in tourism

The phenomenon of Flights to Nowhere represents an opportunity to better understand the ethical decision-making process in travel and tourism, with a focus on recognition of ethical dilemmas, awareness-attitude-behaviour gaps, and neutralization of morally questionable behaviour. Travel in the era of climate change has received some attention in both the academic literature and the mainstream news in the past decade as the existential crisis of climate change and air travel's contribution to it has grown in importance (Morten et al., 2018). Previous research has asked tourists broadly about their attitudes towards flying, perceptions of carbon offsetting, and flying behaviour in light of climate change (e.g. McDonald et al., 2015). The Flights to Nowhere phenomenon presents a unique opportunity to extend knowledge in this area as exploring the reasons and justification for flying are not conflating by choosing to visit a particular destination. While there have been sightseeing flights in the past (Bauer, 2007), to the authors' best knowledge they have never been studied from an ethical decision-making viewpoint.

Despite a long tradition of sustainability research in tourism, the focus on ethics in travel and tourism is rather recent. Tourism presents unique settings for exploring ethics, as tourism is predominantly a hedonic activity, that often takes place in cross-cultural settings and away from the typical social constraints, such as family or employer (McKercher, 2015). Conversely, studies of ethical decision-making among tourists provide important insights that can help manage tourists' behaviour. Ethical decision-making is best explored using specific scenarios and examples rather than

through abstract perceptions and general questions (Tolkach et al., 2017). Flights to Nowhere provide such a specific scenario.

An ethical decision-making process is complex. Rest's (1986) model of moral action identifies four steps. First, moral awareness takes place, which is the recognition of an individual's action will have moral implications. Moral judgment then evaluates different courses of action in terms of an individual's moral values. Subsequently, moral intention results from the individual selecting the most ethically acceptable action. The final step is performing moral behaviour. Jones (1991) further introduces factors that affect ethical judgement, such as the moral intensity of a scenario and the environmental factors in which the scenario takes place. For example, an action that leads to great harm, or is perceived unacceptable by society, is less likely to be taken, however, a deviant action may be still taken due to external pressure or when the harm is unlikely or not immediate.

With increasing emphasis, literature has highlighted decision-making models that exclusively rely on rational and conscious processes cannot explain behaviour. An ethical dilemma may not be recognized at all, while other decisions may be made habitually. Thus, gaps emerge between the awareness, attitudes, and behaviours that may lead to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory has been used to better understand environmentally unfriendly behaviours among tourists in general (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2021) and flying behaviour among 'green' consumers more specifically (McDonald et al., 2015).

Cognitive dissonance occurs when there is an inconsistency between an individual's beliefs and their actions (Festinger, 1957). This inconsistency can drive individuals to change their behaviour, adjust their beliefs and attitudes, or add other ideas to their belief structure so that consonant beliefs outweigh the dissonant elements (Aronson, 1992). This is where neutralization techniques can help the individual become consistent (see below). Cognitive dissonance is concerned with the notion of self-concept: how individuals perceive themselves (Aronson, 2019). If the individual's beliefs are inconsistent with their behaviour, they will have a negative perception about themselves in this situation and desire to remedy the situation (Aronson, 1968). This is also known as self-consistency theory. Cognitive dissonance occurs only in situations where the individual has a choice or some agency over the situation (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Thøgersen, 2004). The decision to take a Flight to Nowhere fits this scenario well.

McDonald et al. (2015) argue that research using both cognitive dissonance theory and neutralization theory can help to better understand the green attitude-behaviour gap. McDonald et al. (2015) emphasize the cognitive component of dissonance, which can be observed and discussed with individuals while the neutralization techniques can be understood as ways to reduce the dissonance. Juvan and Dolnicar (2021) outline how neutralization techniques can be used to reduce cognitive dissonance. This research also adopts such an approach.

Neutralization

Neutralization is a thought process whereby individuals rationalize their unethical or morally questionable behaviour. Proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957) over 60 years ago, to help explain youth deviant behaviour, neutralization helps individuals cope with decision conflict and psychological tensions such as guilt and blame. Neutralization techniques include *denial of responsibility* whereby consumers argue that they are not personally accountable for the unethical behaviour because of factors beyond their control; *denial of injury* where unethical behaviour is argued not to cause any serious injury and no one is directly affected; *denial of victim* where unethical behaviours are justified by arguing that the aggrieved party somehow deserves whatever happened; *condemning the condemners* where the unethical behaviours are justified by pointing out those who condemn engage in similarly disapproving activities; *appeal to high loyalties* where it is argued unethical behaviours are justified to meet the needs to a smaller social group (e.g. family or friends) at the expense of larger society; *defence of necessity* where the transgressing individual claims they had no other choice; *everybody does it* sees the individual justify their inappropriate

behaviour because their peers are also behaving that way; *justification by comparison* whereby the individual is choosing the lesser of two evils; and *postponement* where the individual claims they acted without thinking (e.g. Cromwell & Thurman, 2003).

Neutralization has been used, predominantly in sociology research, to help understand the attitude-behaviour gap concerning unethical or inappropriate behaviour in several different contexts. Fritsche (2005) provides a useful review of the work in the area, up until the mid-2000s. While initially employed to understand issues such as juvenile and adult delinquency (Costello, 2000; Fox, 1999) amongst other issues, more recently neutralization has been employed to examine consumer (and tourist) behaviour. Chatzidakis et al. (2004) explore a range of unethical consumer behaviours where consumers justify shoplifting, pirating software and music, and not recycling. McKercher et al. (2008) examine how tourists justify inappropriate behaviour at the contested cultural heritage site of Uluru, Australia.

Neutralization is used as the conceptual framework of this research. Different from previous research, this paper examines the new phenomenon of Flights to Nowhere and its relationship with greenhouse gas emission and more broadly climate change. To the authors' best knowledge, the only other research that touches on the issue of the neutralization regarding climate change is the work by McKie (2019). McKie (2019) analyses the neutralization techniques of the climate change counter movement who use a variety of justifications including denial of responsibility, denial of victim, denial of injury, condemn the condemner and appeal to higher loyalties to refute the disaster of climate change. While McKie's research analyses documents from the climate change denier movement, this research seeks responses from air passengers.

Dissonance between tourists' air travel and climate change

Air travel has dramatically increased over the past few decades (Young et al., 2014) resulting in air travel becoming a routine occurrence deeply embedded in 'normal' behaviour (Randles & Mander, 2009). This increase in air travel has consequences for the environment, predominantly in the form of greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to climate change. However, Cohen et al. (2011) argue that air passengers may deny harmful consequences of their air travel as these are external to the passengers and are felt by the environment and society at large.

Several studies, while not necessarily using the term 'neutralization' demonstrate how travellers cope with the cognitive dissonance between environmental concerns and travel behaviour. Cohen et al. (2011) uncover neutralization techniques among travellers of denial of injury and denial of responsibility to illustrate how travellers suppress guilt and rationalize what constitutes excessive air travel while continuing their frequent flying. Hanna and Adams (2019) identify several discursive barriers to sustainable tourism transport choices amongst travellers that report being concerned about the environment. These strategies are generally linked to three types of denial: literal (climate change is not happening), interpretive (climate change is happening, but one's behaviour is not seen as consequential), and implicatory (climate change is happening and is anthropogenic, but an individual constructs a moral license to act unsustainably).

Most of the above literature reports studies of dissonance between tourist behaviours and attitudes towards climate change that ask travellers very broadly about their attitudes and intended behaviours. However, the research in ethical decision-making suggests the use of specific scenarios to better understand the ethical decision-making process (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990). Participants of this study have recently flown on a Flight to Nowhere, thus we can investigate the actual behaviours and attitudes attributed to a specific case, rather than asking about abstract intentions. The Flight to Nowhere phenomenon is especially suitable to study the cognitive dissonance between climate change and air travel, as it eliminates some discursive strategies used by respondents that are related to the attributes of the destination rather than the flight itself. As noted above, the case chosen is in Fiji, one of the Pacific Islands nations being affected by climate change, where adaptation and mitigation policies feature prominently (Lyons, 2019). The study is also undertaken

during the COVID-19 pandemic. The balance between caring about climate change and taking any opportunity for recreation and travel may have changed in a world of travel restrictions and social distancing.

The Fiji context

The context for this research is the Pacific Island nation of Fiji, where Fiji Airways offered Flights to Nowhere. Fiji has been chosen as a case study for several reasons. Air transportation is the major contributor to these emissions (Lenzen et al., 2018). As a Small Island Development State in the Pacific, Fiji heavily relies on aviation but is also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Nichols, 2019). Nowhere are the detrimental impacts of climate change being felt more than among Pacific Island Countries and Territories (IPCC, 2021). The effects of climate change in Fiji such as sea level rises, beach erosion, and increases in the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events have been highlighted (Currenti et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand air passengers' views on travel in destinations that will be most impacted by climate change. With over 330 tropical islands, Fiji has the natural resources as well as cultural attractions that make tourism the key sector for the economy. In 2019, Fiji hosted 894,389 international visitors who contributed US$1.396 billion in expenditures (SPTO, 2020). Tourism earnings as a percentage of GDP were 25.9% in the same year. In 2020, international visitor arrivals dropped by 83% to 146,905 (although 139,701 visitors arrived in January to March, before COVID hit). The importance of tourism to Fiji and the devastating impact the pandemic has had on the economy is another reason for examining Flights to Nowhere in this context. Lastly, Fiji Airways is the national carrier of Fiji. Commencing operation in 1951, Fiji Airways is 52% owned by the Fiji Government. The pandemic has caused the Fiji Government to borrow funds for a US$200 million bailout for the airline to remain solvent (Airline Economics, 2020). The airline's need to generate income in this COVID period in a tourism-dependent country also provides justification to undertake research in this context.

Methods

Given the nature of the research questions and the novelty of the phenomenon of Flights to Nowhere, a qualitative approach was implemented to understand the motivations of taking these flights and the interplay with the issue of climate change. In-depth interviews allowed research participants to freely talk through their thought processes and decision-making when considering taking the Flight to Nowhere. A qualitative approach is the most appropriate to capture in-depth knowledge (Hollis, 1994). This methodological paradigm enabled us to capture detailed descriptions, and gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Flights to Nowhere, in particular the passengers' motivations for taking the flights and subsequent justifications in light of climate change (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Building on this foundation allows us to develop a more universal interpretation of human experience inside a phenomenon that has been understudied (Anderson & Spencer, 2007).

Flights to Nowhere

Sightseeing flights, often over land and returning to the same destination, are not new. Bauer (2007) chronicles the charter flights from Australia over Antarctica that started in 1977. Examples of other Flights to Nowhere include one to two-hour flights over the Grand Canyon or the Great Barrier Reef. Another popular Flight to Nowhere is when tourists take a joy-flight past Mount Everest and the Himalayas in a 19-seater aircraft (Chandra et al., 2020).

This research examines Flights to Nowhere operated by Fiji Airways on A350-900XWB aircraft out of Nadi International Airport. The date of the two flights was October 10, 2020, and January 2, 2021. The first flight coincided with the Republic of Fiji's 50th anniversary as an independent nation. Both

flights were approximately three hours in length. A light meal was served during the flight. The flight paths took the passengers on a sightseeing journey over many of Fiji's Islands, including its two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. To maximize viewing, a limited number of seats were made available for sale on the aircraft. There were approximately 70 passengers on board each flight.

Sample and sampling

The target population for the research is passengers who took a recent Flight to Nowhere. Purposive snowball sampling was employed (Bryman, 2016). Purposive sampling is particularly useful when selecting participants based on key characteristics (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The process started with identifying passengers through the personal and business network of the researchers. We identified known passengers and subsequently invited them to participate in the research. At the end of these interviews, participants were asked to refer anyone they knew who had also taken a Flight to Nowhere. Hence, purposeful sampling was then complemented by snowball sampling. When conducting qualitative research with a limited and specialized population, snowball sampling is appropriate (Rao & Perry, 2003). This snowballing of participants was effective, given that many people are highly connected in the Fiji community. Purposeful sampling complemented by snowball sampling has been used to good effect in previous research when sampling populations who are hard-to-reach, have specific characteristics or consumption patterns, for example, travel vloggers (He et al., 2021) and astrological tourists/enthusiasts (Soleimani et al., 2019).

Twelve in-depth interviews were collected whereupon data collection ended when no different responses arose and data was deemed saturated (or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data) (Constantinou et al., 2017). Hence, the sample size was determined based on data saturation, as no new emergent themes were identified after a thorough scrutiny of the interview transcripts. Although 12 is a relatively small number of interviews, Guest et al. (2006) suggest that a minimum of 12 interviews are sufficient to reach data saturation. Several researchers have used in-depth interviews for research with a small number of participants, across both tourism (He et al., 2021, 12 participants) and more general consumer research (Eynon et al., 2018, 9 participants; Hollebeek et al., 2014, 10 participants).

Table 1 shows the profile of the research participants. Seven males and five females were interviewed. The age of these passengers ranged from 19 to 70 years of age with an average of 40.8 years. All participants are Fiji nationals. The participants took a Flight to Nowhere from Nadi airport in Fiji either in October 2020 or January 2021. The air passengers had a mix of occupations, predominantly in the service sectors. Participants reported a range of previous flying experiences. Some participants had only flown domestically previous to this flight. Others habitually flew once or twice a year to visit friends and family in Australia or New Zealand. Several passengers were very frequent international travellers. As evidenced by Table 1 the sample provides a diversity of demographics, despite the

Table 1. Profile of Flight to Nowhere passengers.

#	Gender	Age	Occupation	Flight date
R1	Male	19	Student	10 October 2020
R2[a]	Male	53	Airline Consultant	10 October 2020
R3	Female	36	Business Development Manager	02 January 2021
R4[a]	Male	50	Academic	10 October 2020
R5	Female	70	School Administrator	10 October 2020
R6	Male	36	Customs Officer	10 October 2020
R7	Male	24	Advertising copywriter	10 October 2020
R8	Female	30	Radio Personality	10 October 2020
R9[a]	Male	51	HR Training Officer	02 January 2021
R10	Male	30	Unemployed due to COVID	02 January 2021
R11[a]	Female	55	Self-employed	10 October 2020
R12	Female	36	Loyalty Club Manager	02 January 2021

[a]Denotes categorized themselves as frequent flyers.

initial sampling from the first author's personal networks. As this is a qualitative study the sample does not aim to be representative of the population but aims to identify the diversity of views.

Interviewing process and discussion guide

Potential participants were first contacted through email or social media requesting their participation. The objectives of the research were explained and potential participants were told that the interviews would be for research purposes only, that participants' identity would not be divulged and the participants could stop the interview at any time. The preferred method of data collection was through one-on-one in-depth interviews conducted either in-person (if located in the same location) or via zoom or over the phone if the researchers and the participants were not in the same location. One-on-one interviews were perceived to be more appropriate than alternatives such as focus groups due to the potentially socially awkward situation of the misalignment between attitudes and behaviours. Interviews were conducted in English, the official language of Fiji and the native language of the first author.

Research ethics approval was sought and granted from the first author's university before commencing. The semi-structured interviews in this study opened by asking participants about themselves followed by broad questions on the Flight to Nowhere experience (check-in, on-board service, food and beverages served, in-flight entertainment …) and their motivation for taking the flight. It was important to unearth motivations to take the flight as these motivations were used as justifications in the neutralization techniques. The discussion then broadened out to cover the passengers' travel behaviour before the COVID-19 pandemic, including the frequency of their previous flying and the degree to which they missed flying in this Post COVID-19 world. The conversation then broadened again to discuss the most important global issues. If climate change was not spontaneously mentioned, the interviewer probed the participants for their views on the importance of climate change and if they had taken any action to mitigate climate change. Climate change was not mentioned to participants straight away to avoid social desirability bias. From there, the interviewer pointed out that there has been some criticism in the media related to Flights to Nowhere as these flights result in (what some say are) unnecessary carbon emissions (as noted above, for example, Fortune, 2020). Participants were asked their opinion on this and how they reconciled going on these flights. This was the key data, but it required a circuitous route to arrive at this information.

Data analysis

We follow the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse the data. With the permission of the participants, the in-depth interviews were recorded and then transcribed. To establish the credibility of the findings, this process necessitated a comprehensive reading and re-readings of the transcripts. This was undertaken by the first author who identified an initial set of codes for the motivations and neutralization techniques, guided by the literature. The literature on neutralization techniques was used as the base to coding the justifications for taking the Flights to Nowhere (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003; Sykes & Matza, 1957). The second author coded the data separately. Through an iterative process, codes were compared and contrasted to resolve any discrepancies, of which there were few (Saldana, 2009). The coding was performed manually. Through this iterative approach, the findings emerged and gave rise to different motivations and justifications. Lastly, the authors selected compelling quotes that were deemed most exemplary to explain the theme. As an example, Respondent 4 stated ' … with Fiji Airways there've been two of these flights in the last two months. I think it's really a drop in the ocean. And I think we've got to always in choose life, and we have to choose the significant battles that we need to fight and make a loud noise about and which are the ones really, it's not worth it. Not worth having a go at people with an

insignificant impact'. This neutralization technique was coded as 'denial of injury' because the taken action is rationalized as not leading to significant negative impacts.

Results

The results section is segmented into two main parts: (1) the motivation to take the Flight to Nowhere and the subsequent experience and (2) cognitive dissonance and the neutralization techniques used to justify the trip that results in somewhat unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions. Through addressing the first two research objectives, we are able to answer the third objective of understanding the awareness-attitude-behaviour gap in the case of Flights to Nowhere.

Motivation for and experience of the Flight to Nowhere

When asked why these passengers took a flight to nowhere the two predominant reasons given were to do something unique and to share in a special experience with family and friends. These motivations are identified as 'novelty' and 'relationships' in Pearce's (2019) Travel Career Pattern. The form two of the three core motivations, the third being escape/relaxation. The chance to participate in a new experience and see their own country from this unique perspective was one of the prime drivers for taking the flight. News about the inaugural flight was covered in the local media. This increased the excitement amongst the passengers. As noted by one passenger:

> … looking for something new because I have never flown over Fiji thus I was looking forward to seeing the different islands around Fiji. I was excited because I was going on an A350 plane [a new aircraft in the fleet]. This year has been challenging as I go to New Zealand every year during the Christmas break and this year I am not able to travel so thought of this as an opportunity to sit on a plane. I have made many trips overseas but first time on A350. (R1, Male, 19 years)

The other primary motivation for taking the flight was to share this special experience with significant others. Going on this flight with their friends and family was a way for some passengers to make special memories. Numerous passengers reported the reason for going on the flight was to introduce their young children to flying because they had never been on a flight previously. Another passenger took her domestic helper on the flight because the helper had not flown before either. To celebrate a special occasion was also another motivation for taking the flight. As one passenger commented:

> I took this flight to celebrate my husband's birthday on board. Since borders are currently closed and I could not plan an international trip, so thought to take a flight to nowhere. I wanted to do something special for him, as it was his first birthday after our marriage. (R12, Female, 36 years)

Several passengers stated that due to COVID-19 restrictions, they had missed flying and travelling more generally. Taking a Flight to Nowhere brought back good memories and a sense of nostalgia. One participant expressed it as follows:

> I'm a member of the Qantas frequent flyer program and also a member of the Fiji Airways program … given that borders have been closed since March and I haven't travelled internationally, regionally and even domestically … it was like a great opportunity. (R4, Male, 50 years)

Nostalgia and the idea of reminiscing about previous travel are related to another motivation some passengers had regarding the need to escape. These passengers, particularly frequent flyers, saw the Flight to Nowhere as a chance to start flying again and an escape, even for a few hours, as captured in the following comment:

> Well, I love flying. I even collect aircraft models. It was a hobby since I was small. I had the aspiration to become a pilot … every annual leave, I'll go overseas. Over the last five years, I went to Egypt, Dubai, then Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore and weekends in Australia. I used to travel overseas once a year just to get out of the country. (R9, Male, 51 years)

These reasons contributed to the neutralization techniques Flight to Nowhere passengers used to justify their trip (discussed below).

Whilst traditionally a flight is seen as an inconvenience, research participants' comments suggest the Flight to Nowhere is a complete and satisfactory experience. The following quote exemplifies the sentiment regarding the flight's quality:

> … everything was excellent because it was a special flight, they were really laying everything on, particularly the ground service. They have more staff than necessary. The food was excellent, and they catered to the special occasion … so they really went overboard. Put a lot of thought into it. The views from the plane were excellent, I took hundreds of photos and sent them to friends (R5, Female, 70 years)

Passengers' positive perceptions of the experience also contribute to the justification to take the Flight to Nowhere. Because it was perceived as a good experience, was used as a basis for the neutralization techniques.

Climate change and Flights to Nowhere

When asked what the most pressing global issues are, not surprisingly, all participants mentioned COVID-19 and its health and economic impacts. When probed on any other issues, despite climate change being an existential problem whose effects have become increasingly visible and damaging, few participants spontaneously mentioned climate change as a pressing global issue. Participants' responses reflect immediate dangers and current media stories. When prompted by the interviewer, however, all participants agreed that climate change was an important issue. This is exemplified by quotes from several participants. When asked if climate change was an important global issue, the response was:

> … oh, yes that's what I wanted to say, global warming … I think that is currently affecting us at the moment. Due to changes in the weather, lots of flooding and cyclones a few weeks back as well as tsunami warnings, and landslides, so everyone is affected. Rising water levels are affecting our coastlines (R3, Female, 36 years)

And

> With climate change in the past month, we've had scare after scare in terms of tropical cyclones. I was just chatting with a friend of mine today in his late 40s and he was saying that … back in the day when he was my age and he was younger. This was unheard of, you never had big storms and bad weather at this higher frequency. It's obvious that things are changing over the years and it's becoming … its almost becoming like an unfathomable problem to solve because how do we reverse this? (R10, Male, 30 years)

When asked who should be responsible for mitigating the effects of climate change and what could be done to mitigate its effects, most participants felt it was everyone's responsibility, although participants emphasized the role of individuals' more, while acknowledging that businesses and governments also play an important role. A range of actions was suggested to mitigate climate change; some more directly linked to greenhouse gas emissions than others. Some passengers advocated planting more trees or at least not cutting down trees. Other passengers proposed to recycle waste, ban single-use plastics and refrain from discarding waste into the waterways. Only two of the 12 passengers specifically mentioned promoting renewable energy and fuel-efficient transportation. No one mentioned a reduction in air travel.

In summary, research participants do not reject anthropogenic climate change. Moreover, participants generally believe it is everyone's responsibility to mitigate climate change; however, there is a lack of awareness of the full spectrum of behaviours that need to be adapted to do so. Since Flights to Nowhere do not take passengers to a destination, the utilitarian values that explain the behaviour of some travellers in Cocolas et al. (2020) and literal and interpretive denial of climate change in Hanna and Adams (2019) cannot be used by the participants in the present study. All of the above suggests that this study provides a setting that contributes to knowledge of the neutralization techniques that address cognitive dissonance between climate change and an individual's behaviour.

Neutralization techniques

Passengers used a range of neutralization techniques when confronted with the criticism in the media that these Flights to Nowhere create unnecessary carbon emissions. Neutralization techniques that were used covered appeal to higher loyalties, denial of injury and justification by comparison.

The most common justification passengers used to reconcile taking a Flight to Nowhere was the Appeal to Higher Loyalties. This appeal contends that it is ok to unnecessarily contribute to carbon emissions because the flights are fulfilling a higher purpose. Several passengers commented that taking a flight to nowhere financially supports the airline and helps it stay economically viable:

> at the end of the day everybody is looking for ways to earn money, and for their businesses to earn money, because there are no international flights at the moment. The only thing FJ Airways can do is fly domestically and arrange for these kinds of special flights to keep it running. (R3, Female, 36 years)

Apart from the contribution these passengers have made to economically sustaining the airline, a different example of appealing to higher loyalties is the justification for a special experience with loved ones for a special occasion. For example, if someone in the travel party was having a birthday or had not flown before. If this was the case, then it seems justifiable to take the flight. One demonstration of this can be seen in the following quote:

> But for me, it was more about giving the experience to the house girl on what it would feel like if she ever had to fly … and because she's not a traveller, you know she enjoyed it (R11, Female, 55 years)

Another neutralization technique passengers used was a *denial of injury*. Several passengers argued that because these were infrequent flights and relatively short in duration, they were not really causing any serious injury or major contribution to carbon emissions. Passengers commented they were 'one-off flights' and 'they don't go every day' or 'a drop in the ocean'. These types of views indicate that passengers rationalize that no one is directly affected, at least compared to the pre-COVID situation. One passenger opined:

> … I don't agree with the idea [the criticisms in the media about Flights to Nowhere] … as we know air travel … there are thousands of flights every single day across the globe and if we put it into perspective, a three-hour flight that a single aircraft jet is doing over, you know, our country … I really do not see any connection between how that one little activity and any real impact on rising sea levels, you know … greenhouse gases (R10, Male, 30 years)

Justification by comparison is another neutralization technique used by passengers to justify their Flight to Nowhere. In this situation, passengers justify their travel by pointing out that these flights emit a lot less pollution and carbon than other activities, such as the manufacturing sector and its factories. As one passenger highlighted:

> It's (the flight) only like one and a half hours and for climate change, it's not really gonna affect that much significantly. The climate change or greenhouse gases from other businesses like factories … they should look at. How some of these industries here are dumping into the ocean. Maybe they should look more into that, instead of flights (R9, Male, 51 years)

Discussion

Due to the closing of borders and cessation of international flights due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a range of different airlines in countries including Australia, Brunei, Fiji, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan have offered 'Flights to Nowhere'. These sightseeing flights start and finish at the same airport and involve a flight of several hours. They have come under criticism for causing unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to climate change.

This research uncovered the main reasons for taking the Flight to Nowhere. Some passengers definitely missed flying in the COVID period of international immobility. They desired to have a

unique experience (Lee & Crompton, 1992). The other main reason for taking the flight was to share a special experience with family and friends, i.e. socialization (Crompton, 1979). Relationships and novelty are two core motivations to travel according to Pearce (2019) travel career patterns that both experienced and novel travellers identify with, thus Flights to Nowhere have a broad appeal. These motivations partially explain why Flights to Nowhere have been booked out quickly in different parts of the world (Fortune, 2020).

Research participants acknowledge that anthropogenic climate change is a significant global challenge. However, the issue was not always top of mind. Participants also suggested that mitigating climate change is everyone's responsibility. Participants have not named air travel as a contributor to climate change. Despite Gössling et al. (2020) pointing towards high awareness of air travel's contribution to climate change, the present study suggests there may be still a lack of such awareness in certain populations, even in places like Fiji, where the climate crisis is high on the agenda.

Interestingly, participants still found ways to justify their behaviour rather quickly, and justifications did not contradict any previous value statement. Previous research (e.g. Hanna & Adams, 2019; Higham et al., 2014) suggests passengers may deny climate change or the impact of individual's actions on climate change to resolve flyers' dilemma. Passengers may also justify flying by the attributes of a destination, e.g. it being remote or an island. These justifications were not available to research participants, and they have focused on what Hanna and Adams (2019) term as implicative discursive strategies that justify flying. Essentially, through appealing to higher loyalties, denial of injury and justification, by comparison, participants construct a moral license to take Flights to Nowhere.

It is largely assumed that moral decisions are taken either consciously or subconsciously (e.g. habitual behaviour or intuition) prior to action (Woiceshyn, 2011). The present study demonstrates that individuals may not recognize they face a moral dilemma in a specific situation, even if they are aware of broader ethical issues. Nonetheless, a post hoc justification of prior behaviour may be undertaken. Further research based on the findings from this study may focus on the extent to which post hoc rationalization of behaviour is common.

Contribution to knowledge

This research adds to a better understanding of the tourists' neutralization techniques in tourism contexts. Other studies have looked at the cognitive dissonance with respect to the environment (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014, 2021) and air travel (Higham et al., 2014; Young et al., 2014), yet Flights to Nowhere are a specific case that helps explore ethical issues in tourism. These flights are taken purely for hedonistic reasons and are a way of spending leisure time. Flights to Nowhere eliminate justification of taking a flight by a destination's attributes. Being one of the first studies of Flights to Nowhere, this study provides a benchmark of the characteristics and perceptions of this phenomenon that future research can build on.

Secondly, while there has been research into the nexus between climate change and air transportation (Dogru et al., 2019; Gössling et al., 2020; Young et al., 2014), no studies, to the best of our knowledge, have sought to understand passengers' decisions to fly and subsequent rationalizations of air travel shortly after taking a flight. Requiring passengers to think specifically about a recent flight adds to the reality of the responses, as opposed to other studies which ask about air travel in general or about a hypothetical flight. Thirdly, we use the theory of cognitive dissonance and neutralization to categorize the justifications passengers used to take a Flight to Nowhere in light of the unnecessary carbon emissions. Neutralization theory has been used to examine justifications in a range of different contexts, but none have examined the rationalization of unnecessarily contributing to climate change, at least from air passengers' perspectives.

McKie (2019) work on the neutralization of climate change involved an examination of documents produced by the Climate Change Counter Movement. While McKie found that *Condemnation of the Condemner* was the most popular neutralization technique in her study, we note that *Appeal to*
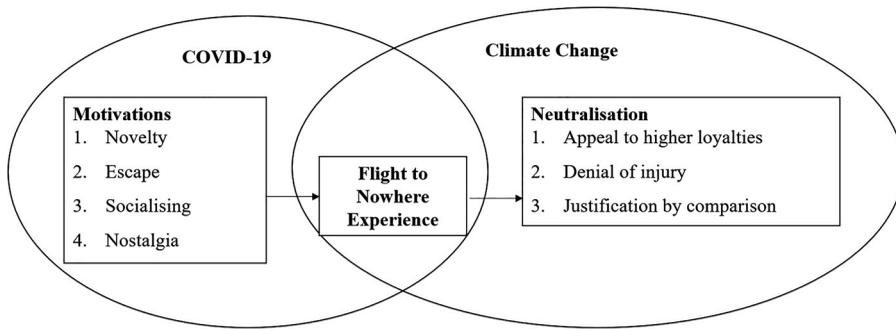
Figure 1. Motivations for and neutralization of Flights to Nowhere.

Higher Loyalties was the most common justification for the flight. Conversely, McKercher et al. (2008) conclude that in the decision to climb a sacred rock, more tourists claimed *Everyone else is doing it* as a justification. This suggests that ethical dilemmas need to be studied in context and specific scenarios need to be applied as different types of justifications can be produced (Tolkach et al., 2017). It is also important to understand who the participants consider responsible for the ethical action. In this case, participants generally suggested that individuals are responsible for mitigating climate change. Thus, it was indeed logical to use *Appeal to Higher Loyalties, Denial of Injury* and *Justification by Comparison. Condemning the condemner* and *Everyone else is doing it* shifts the responsibility away from the perpetrator. Participants in this study have not denied their responsibility for the action, they justified the action as if it was made based on their sound judgement: for example, the benefits for the financial bottom line of the country's major airline affected by the COVID-19 pandemic outweigh 'insignificant' carbon emissions. Furthermore, the *Appeal to Higher Loyalties* highlights the overall challenge of changing individual behaviours to more sustainable, as individuals prioritize immediate benefits for their inner social circle of the long-term benefits for society as a whole. In this case, the priority is to provide a memorable experience for a friend or a family member. The conceptualization and results of the study can be shown in Figure 1.

Contribution to practice/management

The findings reveal the awareness-attitude-behaviour gap among many of these passengers. Passengers agreed climate change was a gravely important issue but justified their actions to take a Flight to Nowhere (ElHaffar et al., 2020). Given the disconnect most passengers had with them taking a Flight to Nowhere and contributing to carbon emissions, policymakers and NGOs should implement awareness plans showing the different ways human activity contributes to climate change. Education can demonstrate which decisions and actions and how decisions and actions at the local level have grave global implications. Climate change adaptation and mitigation could be introduced as a particular subject or could be mainstreamed into primary and high school education so that the next generation of adults has a clear understanding of this imminent disaster (Schreiner et al., 2005). Environmental groups and governments could encourage residents to undertake pro-environmental behaviours in every area of their lives. Airlines could be required to label carbon emissions on their booking platforms showing the approximate amount of greenhouse gases that are emitted on their intended flight. These CO_2 amounts can then be converted to concepts that people can identify with, such as the equivalent kilometres or time driving a car. Regularly seeing the CO_2 emissions of individual actions may help to raise awareness of individual actions. This leads to the second recommendation.

Secondly, airlines may continue to offer Flights to Nowhere; to train new staff or generate income if international borders close again. In these situations, airlines could offer passengers the

opportunity to contribute to a voluntary carbon offsetting programme to allow passengers to neutralize their carbon footprint (Liu et al., 2021). Previous research suggests that the take-up of voluntary carbon offsetting is low (McLennan et al., 2014; Ritchie et al., 2021). Liu et al. (2021) demonstrate that passengers who receive detailed specific messages, or if passengers are offered the choice of more than one voluntary carbon offsetting programme, are more likely to opt-in to voluntary carbon offsetting programmes when flying in the near future. Similarly, Governments could impose a carbon tax on the price of the air ticket so that funds could be channelled to climate change adaptions and mitigation initiatives. Imposing a carbon tax goes some way to take into account the full economic and environmental cost of the flight. An appropriate policy response would be to include the full cost of environmental damage into the price of the air ticket by combining compulsory, non-tradable caps on aviation-related emissions with voluntary schemes (Gössling et al., 2007).

Lastly, instead of offering Flights to Nowhere, airlines could follow Singapore Airlines example by offering an exclusive dining experience aboard a grounded A380 aeroplane. Initially, Singapore Airlines proposed to offer Flights to Nowhere. However, backlash from environmental groups and the public made the airline rethink that offering. Realizing that Flights to Nowhere 'encourages carbon-intensive travel for no good reason and … is merely a stop-gap measure that distracts from the policy and value shifts necessary to mitigate the climate crisis' (SG Climate Rally, 2020), Singapore Airlines is now offering lunch on board an Airbus A-380 jumbo jet while watching movies on the plane's in-flight entertainment system, a tour of their training facilities and home delivery of meals from its first class and business class menus (The Straits Times, 2020). Other airlines could follow Singapore Airlines' lead by still engaging with their customers and providing an airline experience without unnecessary carbon emissions.

Conclusions

This study focuses on Flights to Nowhere in Fiji as a setting to further explore ethical decision-making in tourism. Fiji was a relevant context in which to research given that it is highly tourism-dependent. Tourism in Fiji and the wider society has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and Fiji is very vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change. The importance of research into moral dimensions of travel during climate change has been long established (Becken, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, academic publications have expressed advocacy for a more sustainable future of tourism. However, empirical studies that address this challenge are still lacking (Yang et al., 2021). Thus, this study addresses important knowledge gaps within the literature on tourism and climate change.

Given the context, the focus of the paper highlights the need for recognition of an ethical dilemma and neutralization of the dissonance between stated values (climate change is a serious crisis) and behaviour (participating in a Flight to Nowhere). The results suggest that there may still be a lack of awareness of how individual behaviours contribute to climate change. Even when individuals do not recognize an ethical dilemma at the time of making a decision or performing an action, they can make a post hoc ethical judgment. The judgment is unlikely to directly contradict their values (e.g. climate change denial) and is may result in constructing a moral social license to act.

This research is not without limitations. Flights to Nowhere are a relatively new 'product' offered by various airlines. While the products are relatively generic across airlines, this study involved participants from one airline, Fiji Airways. It is unknown if results would differ across airlines. A comparative study would be interesting to conduct. Second, this research involved understanding the ethical decision-making process of passengers who had taken a Flight to Nowhere by examining their motivations and neutralization techniques. It would also be revealing to research other individuals who wanted to take such flights but eventually did not for ethical grounds. This would also shed light on ethical decision-making. This is an area for future research. Third, while the study was conducted

in the South Pacific nation of Fiji, where climate change is a real and existential issue, a more detailed quantitative study to understand participants' knowledge of the impacts of climate change, its determinants, including air transportation, and what can be done to mitigate these impacts would provide insights into how to raise awareness or promote pro-environmental behaviour. Tourism and tourists are both victims and culprits of climate change. Further research on this nexus is important in guiding evidence-based decision-making.

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Disclosure statement

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