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# Calibrating Consumption: Flyers' Dilemmas in the Age of the Low-Cost Carrier

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## Introduction: “just like waiting for a bus”

*Maite phones me from somewhere in the terminal, saying that she just arrived through security via the fast lane. She soon shows up, and after we exchange hellos, she immediately apologizes. There is stress at work—her assistant is ill, and she will have to continue to work a bit at the gate because her client needs an immediate reply. We have half an hour until boarding. “Sometimes I arrive at the gate only 15 minutes before boarding,” she points out. She knows exactly how much time she needs to arrive at the airport, to go through security, and to walk to the gate. It is always the same gate. When the enormous window blinds open and the aircraft appears in view, Maite turns to me and says, “It is just like waiting for a bus, right?”*

— excerpt from Katie Daniels's field notes, February 24, 2020.

The Low-Cost Carrier (LCC) model of flying has led to a significant reorganization of daily life over the past few decades. Business travelers, students, and labor migrants have turned to LCCs to help facilitate their increasingly mobile worlds—from transnational employment to gap year travel, to maintaining cross-border family lives and relationships. “Flying on the cheap” has meant that air travel—while still overwhelmingly dominated by those with higher incomes and privileged travelers (Gössling et al., 2019)—has become ubiquitous enough to be viewed as “just another mode of public transport” for many transnationally mobile passengers, particularly for those living near easily accessible airports. However, over the past decade, due to a growing awareness of the effects of carbon emissions in the aviation industry and the subsequent emergence of the flight shame movement popularized by Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, numerous air passengers feel a tension between maintaining their current flight practices and the wider environmental impact of flying. Some European self-described frequent flyers are finding themselves at a turning point when it comes to their relationship with sustainability and mobility. This takes the form of what Young and Higham have called the “flyers’ dilemma”: “the tension that exists between the perceived personal benefits of deeply embedded air travel practices and the collective climate change consequences of such practices” (Higham et al., 2014: 2, Young et al., 2015). If flying short-haul with LCCs has become “just like waiting for a bus,” while social norms over the legitimacy of air travel are starting to shift

(Gössling et al., 2019; Kantenbacher et al., 2019), how does this process work in *practice* on an individual level? What do sustainably minded people who fly often actually *do* to balance, mitigate, or live with this dilemma? In this chapter, we investigate how individuals who fly frequently with one European LCC describe their relationship with flying and sustainability in order to deal with such tensions.

Using an approach that explores the overlaps between mobility studies and consumption studies, we argue that sustainably minded flyers (out of a group of 30 air travelers interviewed in 2019 and 2020 before the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic) perceive LCC air travel as an integral part of their regular consumption habits, but feel that they are beginning to reach some limits to their consumption. At these limits, they have to weigh options and balance their mobile and sustainable lives by scaling back on certain types of consumption. While this scaling-back does *not* always involve curbing air travel, it does lead to decisions that involve weighing relative consumption practices against each other, practices that may not initially be seen as directly related to air travel, such as food consumption changes (for instance, becoming vegetarian or cutting down on meat to “balance” this with the amount of air travel), and the temporal deferral of employment choices (for example, flying now for a job to be less dependent on air travel later). Looking at these decision-making processes can show us how “flying on the cheap” is considered a major part of respondents’ everyday lives, and how air travel is subsumed within a general category of domestic consumption—not as an occasional “away from home” exception, as some of the previous literature has suggested (e.g., Barr et al., 2010, 2011a; Randles and Mander, 2009). By readjusting the discourse to flying-as-everyday-consumption—often because neoliberal patterns of deterritorialized, flexible work mean for some participants that there is no option *but* to fly by plane—subsequent studies of LCCs should be viewed beyond the immediate circuit of the flight, as one component of wider societal repercussions (Lin and Harris, 2020). In the pages that follow, we aim to contribute a more emic perspective of the decision-making processes and reasons for consuming flight. Although individuals are becoming increasingly conscious of the detrimental impacts of air travel on the environment and actively try to lessen this impact, they continue to justify their flying based on much wider societal meanings surrounding consumption, such as dietary changes and career stability. Their drive to “do more” for the environment sometimes results in the fact that very little is changed in the end, thus contradicting their drive for more climate consciousness.

## **“... Even the greenest people fly”: the home versus away distinction, overconsumption, and the role of the individual**

The liberalization of European skies alongside the growth in LCCs since 2001 has created a wide market for nonstop or point-to-point flights, as well as increased the normalization of air travel due to the lower costs of LCC travel (Adey, 2006; Adey et al., 2007; Fichert and Klophaus, 2016; Sallan and Lordan, 2020). Although the

low-cost aspect of these flights initially seemed to provide more egalitarian access to air travel for those with lower income levels, it has since been demonstrated that most LCC flights—at least in Europe—are still dominated by passengers with relatively high incomes (Barr et al., 2011; Gössling and Nilsson, 2010). And while easy access to airports that facilitate connections and lessen waiting time has enabled frequent business travel (Budd and Hubbard, 2010), these increased connections also enable cheap migrant labor, such as Nepali construction workers who travel to the Gulf States to build infrastructure elsewhere (Lin and Harris, 2020). Thus, the increase in connections, “largely accounted for by the growth of low-cost airlines, raises a series of critical issues concerning this ‘new’ form of (environmentally significant) practice that need to be addressed by researchers” (Barr et al., 2011, emphasis added).

Previous research on the flyer's dilemma and similar tensions (Alcock, 2017; Barr et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2011, 2013; Higham et al., 2014; Rosenthal, 2010) addresses the “attitude-behaviour gap” produced between consumers' well-meaning attitudes toward sustainability and their actual behavioral change. In other words, while people might be well aware of the negative impact of individual carbon-heavy consumption practices, their voluntary behavior change is limited. Despite their well-meaning environmental awareness and a recent shift in social norms regarding everyday sustainable measures (Gössling et al., 2019), most research has shown that air travelers do not necessarily curb their flying behavior. More specifically, Barr et al., (2010) and (2011a,b) focus on “the home-away gap” investigates one particular facet of the attitude-behavior gap whereby environmentally conscious individuals maintain sustainable practices at home, but not when traveling away from home by air. One of the issues we discovered in our own research was indeed that—very much like Sally Randles and Sarah Mander's work on air travel and climate consciousness—“even the greenest people fly” (Randles and Mander, 2009: 102). In balancing their consumption choices, our participants talked about the daily sustainable things they did such as reusing packaging or eating less meat, which ended up legitimizing their air travel, “providing an emissions quid-pro-quo ‘fair’ exchange for flying” (Randles and Mander, 2009: *ibid*). These perceived expectations were in fact understood by participants as contradictory or “ironic,” putting *even more* ethical pressure on the individual to weigh and rationalize different consumption practices against each other.

However, Randles and Mander have claimed that flying is a visible symbol of social status and conspicuous consumption, “in contrast to the ordinary, everyday settings on which practice theorists have recently alighted to investigate the relationship between sustainability and consumption ...” (Randles and Mander, 2009: 99). While they mostly studied nonfrequent leisure travelers and air travel as a conspicuous form of consumption, we ask instead how frequent LCC travel engenders less of a sense of spatial separation between “home and away” (although this does not mean there is *no* sense of “home”) (Cohen et al., 2015) and is normalized as an everyday practice. Similar to how the proliferation of inexpensive flights with LCCs helps blur the gap between tourism and the everyday (Casey, 2010)—as tourism was previously seen as a break from the ordinary (Urry, 1990; MacCannell, 2001)—pilot and writer

Mark Vanhoenacker (2015) has described the feeling of home-can-be-everywhere-at-any-time not as jet-lag, but as “place-lag,” referring to:

*... the way that airliners can essentially teleport us into a moment in a far-off city; getting us there much faster, perhaps, than our own deep sense of place can travel. I could be in a park in London one afternoon, running, or drinking a coffee and chatting to the dog-walkers. Later I'll go to an airport, meet my colleagues, walk into a cockpit, and take off for Cape Town ... For everyone, and every place, it's the present.*

The increase in place-lag and the weighing of foreign air travel on the same plane as domestic consumption provokes us to rethink how these decision-making processes work in relation to environmental awareness. While Barr et al. (2011a,b) argue that we need to move beyond mundane home-based practices to look at how air travel behavior is understood in “other sectors” such as leisure, we propose to flip the discussion on its head: for some, LCC flying has since *become* a daily, mundane practice. And it is precisely this “mundane everydayness” of frequent flights that begins to worry our respondents in light of climate change discourses.

There is nothing new about the growing attention to too much waste or excess consumption practices. Social scientists studying material histories have shown that, historically, concerns about overconsumption typically emerge following waves of economic overproduction and exploitation of resources (Mintz, 1985; Stuart et al., 2020). This emphasis on overconsumption is often couched—particularly in the global north—in discourses about wasting food, buying luxury items, and spending money on unnecessary items. These are often attributed to lifestyle choices at the individual level, and concern with excess air travel is a case in point. Newspaper articles with headlines such as “Should we give up flying for the sake of the climate?” strongly emphasize curbing individual behaviors and using alternative transport such as trains. However, we need to situate frequent flying within a neoliberal capitalist system that produces and supports the demand for increased consumption and profit, shifting climate responsibility away from states and institutions to self-responsibility (Young et al., 2014, 2015). Curbing flying is thus *felt* as if it must be an individual choice. In this way, frequent flying is associated with other forms of consumption and framed by our respondents as a mode of consumption itself (Young et al., 2015).

Anthropologist Richard Wilk has claimed that “defining the cause of climate change as overconsumption and prescribing a kind of global belt tightening tends to put the burden of *systemic* change on individuals ... One way to recast the problem of consumer culture and climate change in anthropological terms is to phrase it this way: *What makes human wants and needs grow?* How do things that were once distant luxuries—say, hot water—become basic necessities that people expect on demand for civilized life?” (Wilk, 2009: 268). Air travel—spurred by the increase in LCCs—has arguably become one of these things. It should be added that it is not always the elite and not always because it is demanded; instead, flying by air is often done by *necessity* at an individual level—to survive for one’s employment or to be able to send remittances back home to one’s family, reflecting the immediacy and routineness of LCC air travel (Barr et al., 2011b; Burrell 2011; Hirsh, 2017; Lin and Harris, 2020).

“More generally, it can be argued that by legitimising consumption on the one hand (consumption is good) and delegitimising it on the other (consumption leads to environmental destruction), the ‘rationalization of lifestyles’ discourse is self-contradictory” (Kroesen, 2013: 287). What we propose to add to this conversation is an empirical exploration of *how* this legitimizing process is enacted among European LCC flyers, and how changes in consumption practices, as well as justifications for flying to maintain social and economic ties, can lead to contradicting the very climate consciousness they wish to support.

## Methodology

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted by Daniels between November 2019 and March 2020, in conjunction with participants who fly regularly with a European-based LCC (not identified at the request of the airline), which we will call “ZipAir.” ZipAir is a fairly successful mainstream LCC and a mid-size carrier that is a subsidiary of a larger parent company. Like several other European LCCs over the past 5–10 years, ZipAir is working to introduce more sustainable measures and reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in accordance with EU and international air transport association (IATA) targets for 2050. As two anthropologists interested in aeromobility and sustainable futures, we devised an applied anthropological research project—with permission and interest from ZipAir—that aimed at exploring the relationship between ZipAir flyers and increasing awareness of climate change, specifically questioning how frequent flyers organize their highly mobile lives in relation to sustainability. Daniels held interviews and follow-up interviews with approximately 30 collaborators in this research project. The interviewees were all customers of ZipAir, of whom 16 were recruited through social media, and 14 were contacted for follow-up interviews from a survey sent out to 500 customers. All of the interviewees self-identified as flying frequently and the majority of whom were “sustainably minded” in the sense that—while not directly asked about “sustainability”—they discussed their concerns with increasing climate change and practiced environmentally conscious measures such as reusing packaging material or cutting down on products from carbon-heavy industries. ZipAir allowed us to take part in regular meetings as external researchers and to meet staff members interested in issues of sustainability in the aviation industry.

The reason why we use “flying frequently” rather than “frequent flyers” is an emic distinction; some of our respondents flew round-trip six times a year, while others did so weekly or four times a month, yet all considered this to be a lot of flying or even flying too much. After every pseudonym, we have indicated how many times participants fly per month or year, alongside their primary reason for traveling often, to capture the diversity of reasons for frequent air travel—not all of our respondents are stereotypical businessmen (Schubert et al., 2020). Our methods consisted of gathering participants’ attitudes toward flying frequently via a short survey and follow-up phone interviews; however, the bulk of the research relied primarily on qualitative in-person

interviews and participant observation, such as accompanying a passenger on a flight and spending time with respondents as they shopped for food or other items. All of the interviews were dependent on the respondent's availability and respondents were told that the interviews would last at least 1 hour. Sixteen of the interviews were conducted in-person at a location of their own choosing, such as at a café or their home. Out of these 16, more in-depth participant observations and conversations were held with three participants, with whom Daniels (the second author) went shopping, eating, and flying. The remainder of the 30 interviews were conducted by phone as the Covid-19 pandemic began to take hold. Like others have shown in their applied ethnographic work on aviation, spending time with people; discussing and observing their practices brings more nuance and depth to simple written responses about behaviors (Bennett, 2010; Hutchins et al., 2002). One of the more specific reasons for the extensive ethnographic focus was to address the "attitude-behaviour gap" in flying mentioned above; while people may say they have cut down on flying, they may not do so in practice (Alcock et al., 2017; Lassen, 2010). It turned out that our respondents were very conscious of this tension, as we will outline further below.

Our ZipAir respondents are people who travel frequently for a number of different reasons, primarily for work, family, or relationships, and to a lesser extent, leisure, which puts this study in a slightly different realm from other scholarship on low-cost aeromobility and sustainability based more on tourism and leisure passengers (e.g., Barr et al., 2011a; Cohen et al., 2015; Higham et al., 2014). Our respondents were predominantly white middle-class European adults (of whom a few were retired) who live in areas with easy access to public transport and several airports, one of which is a major hub. Collaborators were interviewed in December 2019–March 2020, during the months before the Covid-19 crisis began to arise, with some follow-up interviews as the pandemic continued to unfold. It is important to note that studying this particular group of people reinforces existing studies that expose the inequalities in access to air travel (see for example Budd et al., 2014). And yet, while it is important to emphasize the privileged, elite patterns of flying frequently in the global north, many of our respondents are part of a specific group of flyers who travel short-haul, back and forth between two locations, either for work or for personal connections. Instead of luxury amenities or "elite treatment," they prefer the quick, cheap, and efficient nature of ZipAir (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006). We argue that it is important to stress the difference between experiences of LCC-enabled short distance travel and other kinds of frequent flying (such as on legacy long-haul flights) since "one-size-fits-all governance approaches to change air travel behavior are unlikely to be successful (Bornemann et al., 2018; Schubert et al., 2020: 1533)."

With this research, we follow John Urry who argued that mobility is less about individual behaviors and more about maintaining social networks. In other words, air travel for work or for relationships facilitates "copresence" (Urry, 2002, 2003) that provides "network capital" (Larsen et al., 2005). As time-space compression—the perception that the world is shrinking, enabled by the intensification of global capital—has extended transnational socioeconomic networks in various ways, scholars have emphasized the importance of flight to this copresence (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006; Graham and Shaw, 2008: 1447). Indeed, our participants note that

their reasons for travel involve the maintenance of economic, familial, and/or social relationships. Weighing the relative importance of these social connections against the concern and increasing awareness of climate change was a source of considerable tension for our respondents. Participants were aware and careful about making checks and balances related to mobility, and air travel with ZipAir was described as just *one* component next to a number of other consumption practices, such as eating.

## **“Making conscious choices every day”: sustainability as a balancing act**

As one of our respondents put it, “flying does not feel right anymore.” Sofie [ $\pm 6$  times/year, visits relatives] is in her mid-20s and grew up in Austria. She now works at a company that sells electric cars and loves to cook with homegrown vegetables. Sofie remembers when she began reconsidering her relationship with air travel, stating that “newspapers started writing about it just like that ... I read this newspaper for four years every day and suddenly there was something written about food and something about traveling and biodiversity. Maybe it was there before and I did not pay attention to it, but to me, it felt like it suddenly became important to write about these topics.” Others responded similarly, noticing a shift in climate consciousness and consumption among mostly middle-class individuals, around the year 2010. For instance, Emma [ $\pm 2$  times/month, work] is a “green blogger” and influencer who writes simple “how to” tips and tricks to live more sustainably, and advises start-ups on how to maintain sustainable practices. She stated that her followers have become more climate conscious over the previous 8 years: “But what I can see is that there is a movement in general, everyone is getting a greener mindset, so everyone is more on edge nowadays. My blog has existed for eight years and I can see a great difference between 8 years ago and now. In general, they became unquestionably more aware of and critical about sustainability.” Liz [ $\pm 8$  times/year, visits her partner] experienced this same shift in the supermarket. She talked about more people bringing their own bags, as well as a wider diversity of food on offer for vegetarians and vegans, asserting “yes, more people have become aware of the issues. When I started my little practices of sustainability five years ago, it was only a very little group of people who knew about stuff like this or did something with it. Now, you hear from more people that they are bringing their own bag for bread to the grocery store. You hear it around the news, from each other, the government points it out as well. I notice that more and more people are getting involved.” Finally, Joost [ $\pm 6$  times/year, visit his partner] claimed that “I think that it is something from the last two years or so ... And, well I did not really think about it that much those days. I just didn't like flying because of the small space you have to sit in and people making annoying noises. But then, I was not yet thinking about it being polluting, no.” This increasing “awareness” that individuals experience leads them to try to be environmentally and ethically responsible by making the “right” consumption choices, which can sometimes lead to an *increase* in consumption



practices. As we will see further below, the making of these choices is ultimately dissatisfactory because while they carry the *promise* of change, the broader societal changes that our respondents speak about do not seem to be emerging.

Many respondents clearly expressed that lowering their carbon footprint was not strictly related to their transportation choices. It was much wider and pervasive, and even mundane; it was interwoven in every decision they make. For instance, Emma started with reducing waste and buying more sustainable goods, but over the years her environmentally aware consumption practices have intensified. She now only purchases second-hand clothes, invests in green energy, and has become much more critical about where she will fly for work. Emma said she believed that "... a conscious way of life is about making conscious choices every day. Where do I spend my money, how do I express myself today, or what should and shouldn't I eat, or what should or shouldn't I buy?" Whether to fly or not becomes just one out of many other decisions respondents must make. In other words, flying is placed on the same level as eating less meat or buying less stuff. The ease, cheapness, and efficiency of flying with LCCs—especially with a carrier like ZipAir, whose short-haul destinations are accessible from a number of major cities—have made it so that when participants choose to take the plane, this may be a strain on their sustainable living practices, but it emerges from well-considered decisions.

So how does this process work? Participants make calculated, conscious changes to balance the sense or feeling that they fly too much. To some extent, this sense has been kicked off or influenced by respondents' social networks. For instance, Thomas [ $\pm 1$ /month, work] makes digital video content for ZipAir. He is in his mid-20s, and as it was always his dream to host a travel show or to travel for work, he is pleased this job gives him that opportunity. He noted that around 2015, he did not even think about sustainability or climate change, but since his friends now do, he says he has become more involved as well. Thomas is aware that he would not have made these careful considerations about flying without his friends: "In my direct surroundings, there are many people who became vegetarian or others who focus on recycling and they have the most influence on me. When I am in the supermarket and stand in front of the meat shelves and the meat substitutes, I will choose the vegetarian option now." Leah [ $1 \pm$ time/year, holiday], Emily [ $\pm 6$  times/year, study abroad], and Maite [ $\pm 3$  times/month, work] all explained separately how they are willing to "pay-off" the discomfort they feel when they fly too much. There are many ways to do this, such as giving money to charity, planting trees, or paying a little extra money to "compensate" for the carbon emissions of their flights. Whenever they fly with ZipAir, they make little adjustments to their lives—either directly before or after flying—to solve the dilemma for this specific moment. In this way, it seems like their goal is closer to alleviating guilt or getting out of a moral breakdown (Zigon, 2007) instead of choosing a more sustainable transport option.

To the respondents, it is about weighing consumption options and finding the best one that fits the circumstances they are in. This kind of calibration is about time versus money, versus family, versus sustainability, or other aspects of the dilemma such as steady employment. If the alternative is too expensive, inconvenient, or time consuming, then it becomes more difficult to choose the alternative—often the "morally good" option such as taking the train versus the plane. The highly mobile

situation the respondents are in now is a situation they either rolled into or consciously chose. Either way, they continue to make it work. Air travel forms just one part of a routine or a normalized way of living; it is not something they can easily step aside from (Lassen, 2006: 305). Part of our respondents' solution is to bring sustainability into their daily lives, expanding the sense that consumption encompasses a wide range of practices.

Liz carefully tries to consider and balance out her options in her head: "Well, I think because with all the other aspects of daily life I am doing quite all right, I mean living consciously, so I think that it would be okay to travel by plane. I know it is no real compensation, but I tell myself it is okay." Higham et al. interpret statements that impose justifications for certain behavior as being related to denial and guilt, mostly among their respondents in Norway and Germany (2014: 471). In our research, it seemed that such statements are also a technique for travelers to justify their flying behavior, which in fact makes it easier to continue with it (see also Barr et al., 2010). Incorporating air travel into one's daily consumption practices produces an odd tension that makes it both easier to continue *and* to stop flying.

Yet, there are some who feel that there is limit to these fine-grained decisions. As Sofie remarks, "Life is so complex that it shouldn't be the case that it is our responsibility," She continues, "A lot of decisions should be made for you. I mean, everything that they sell in the supermarket should be good for the environment and future generations. *All mobility options should be the right option ...* So, I think that the role of the government and big companies is to take that responsibility to a greater extent and not lay this down at the consumer, who has to eat organic and fly less." Sofie is conscious that this responsibility is all too often felt at the individual level, and that the widespread accessibility of cheap flights forms part of the problem. Cohen et al. (2011: 1083) explain how "placing the onus of responsibility for managing carbon impacts on other parties" is part of coping with the flyer's dilemma. Individuals readjust their consumption practices as much as they can, but at a certain point they realize there is only so much they can do without help from the airline company, governments, or other institutions (Cohen et al., 2011). As Young (2014, 2015) argues, the problem is that the industry continues with their business while the consumer becomes more and more anxious about the consequences. People will continue to travel, but with more feelings of guilt and anxiety; as a result, the dilemma intensifies (Young, 2015: 5). For sustainably minded LCC airline passengers who travel frequently, this means that this transfer of responsibility actually contributes *more* to thinking about consumption practices in their everyday lives.

For instance, Kirsten [ $\pm 4$  times/month, work] travels to many different European destinations, depending on where the clients of her company are situated. Both Kirsten and Joris [ $\pm 3$  times/month, work] work for companies that are "global organizations." They do not have fixed offices or locations in the city or town they live in. When they travel, they stay in different hotels for short periods, usually for just one or two nights. Kirsten says she feels proud to have started her career at her IT company, but at the same time she is leaning more and more toward sustainable measures, especially when it comes to the nontraveling aspects of her life. She is aware of her middle-class, privileged position, and like Sofie, she is aware of her potential to produce

change, but is also fully conscious of the limits of individual adjustments—that they can only go so far, and that up to a certain point, it is the government, airline, and related industries that may need to change. Kirsten claims:

*I think the issue is twofold. Look, [on the one hand] in terms of clothes, I do not buy clothes from H&M or Primark or any of those shops. On the other hand, I am wearing Nike shoes. Also, I am aware of what I eat, I was brought up with that. I do not eat meat every day, and I pay close attention to where my food comes from, also organic and stuff like that. I am in a privileged position. I can afford to buy the more expensive brands, which are produced organically and last longer, and I can decide to eat expensive things and not to go for the 99-cent chicken breast every day. It is a structural problem to try to be more sustainable, because I have a choice.*

## Consuming flight as a career “necessity”

If a dilemma is about choosing between multiple options, the flyers’ dilemma is sometimes also about choosing between contributing to carbon emissions while traveling by plane frequently and an alternative, *undesirable* outcome. As Joris demonstrates this clearly in the context of choosing between not flying and losing a career:

*How many per month can I skip? In the past ... there were times I was away every week. Last year I was away three times a month, three out of four weeks. And now I try to make that two out of four. So that is my only way of adjusting, because there are no alternatives. Yes, that was since October last year (2019). It was not really during a specific event or a special moment that I realised I have to cut down on flying, but I just grew into it. The thought has been there since ... since last year I realised that I was flying a lot. I know my emission rate is really high, my footprint is really big. Yes, but if I reduce it drastically, there is a chance I will lose control over my work, that I cannot do my job properly. Well, the other option is that I have to retire early [laughs].*

In other words, the undesirable consequence of being strictly environmentally conscious may entail finding another job, moving to the location of the office abroad, not seeing one’s partner, retiring or other similar changes, often perceived as drastic (and impractical). Other alternatives related to transportation methods are more expensive, time consuming, less efficient, less convenient, or less comfortable. Respondents either foresee this upfront or realize it throughout; reorganizing their life to solve or diminish the flyers’ dilemma is by no means effortless or simple. Because flying with ZipAir is part of their daily practice, changing this practice is about breaking with an efficient routine or a normalized way of living. In most cases, current pro-environmental alternatives are neither convenient nor cost-effective for most frequent LCC flyers (Cohen, 2010; Higham, 2014). The stories of the participants below further illustrate this. Hugo [ $\pm 6$  times/year, education] points out the following:

*I think I should be more sustainable, but I have trouble with finding ways to actually do it. Especially concerning a lot of waste; it is so difficult to live a zero-waste lifestyle.*

*Well, not entirely zero waste, but even paying attention to it is already difficult. The shops should be just around the corner, and otherwise you must have the time to travel to those shops, because they are of course a bit further away. I mean, the ones who use less plastic. Also, you must have the money for it. Basically, it is only for people who have money and time, especially money I think.*

Compare this to Kirsten who is aware of her privilege and wealthier income level. Kirsten explains how many colleagues of her age (in their mid-20s) try to find a balance in their consumption practices by rejecting certain expectations and not buying everything—which includes not joining all the “necessary” trips by air. She describes her job, where “every year there is a regional kick off. It takes place in a different country every year. Over 100 people from everywhere are flown to this specific location. I have a couple of colleagues who say they do not go anymore, as they think there is simply no good reason.” Kirsten does not entirely understand why company employees must travel this regularly: “Look, we are flying for every small matter. Seriously, for a two-hour meeting you are expected to be there!” However, Kirsten knows she would still not totally quit flying, because she stresses that she needs to do well in this job to continue her contract and to maintain steady employment.

Peter [ $\pm 3$  times/month, work] is in his 50s and works as a researcher in a bank. He says he thinks that the environment is important, especially the little things: food consumption (he is vegetarian once a week), energy use, minimal car use, and recycling. He is a member of the corporate social responsibility committee at work. Peter evaluates his options and makes his mobility choices based on speed and comfort. A month before our interview with him, he said his company took the time to discuss travel policies with their employees. “Because, you know,” Peter says, “there are many destinations in Europe to where you can take the train. Frankfurt for example, is a location we often travel to. From an environmental perspective it makes much more sense to go by train than by plane. The company travel policy wants to stimulate train travel over plane travel.” However, later on in the interview, he admitted that he prefers the airplane over the train when he has to travel to Frankfurt. Otherwise, he has to book two nights at a hotel, whereas the plane gives him the opportunity to go and come home in 1 day: “Early in the morning you leave the house and late at night you are home again. That is a long day, but in terms of time it is so much more efficient! Yes, I’m sorry, but if I make up the balance, then I do not know if I will automatically end up going by train.” Alongside the fact that intra-European rail connections are not yet smoothly connected enough or fast enough for our participants to choose sustainability over efficiency, finances are a recurring element when speaking about travel options. Some respondents conclude that in general, sustainability is expensive. Not only are environmentally-friendly commodities and sustainable food expensive to purchase, but even train travel is often considerably more expensive than the low cost of ZipAir.

Andres [ $\pm 3$  times/month, work] is a musician. He regularly performs at concerts in two European countries about 1500 km away from each other. When asked about [his feelings about flying and sustainability], he explained: “Well, I recycle. When I have the option to take public transport, I always take it. I use the bike in the Netherlands

and in Spain. In Spain, you are quite a hero, to use a bike. When I have the option, I choose the right one, but in many cases there is no good option. There is no good alternative.” Andres merges recycling practices with travel practices in the same answer, and that he chooses what he believes is the “right” (environmentally-friendly) option, but still, for him, there is no way to get from A to B without flying. Paolo [ $\pm 2$  times/month, work] tells a similar story. He works in Italy but has a partner and children who live about 1000 km away in another country. He says he loves his motherland Italy, and he knows he always has to return to it. When asked about the environmental costs he has to pay, he claims it makes him a bit sad. Paolo cares about the environment a lot. To him, the situation of flying back and forth is just something he incorporated as part of his daily life and is not easily adjustable: “I think flying is the only way to arrive at the destination quickly. Otherwise, I have to go by car and that will take me 20 hours, which also costs more gasoline. Is that better for the environment? ... You have to fly there. Or by boat, but that takes even longer.” To both Andres and Paolo, currently they see no option other than traveling back and forth by air. Recycling or taking the bike is no problem for them, but from there on, the limit of readjusting is hit, as the alternative—breaking with their current mobile routines—would mean much more momentous shifts in their lives, such as interrupting their career trajectory, or upending family relationships.

## Temporal deferral and other debts into the future

A handful of participants rationalize their decision to continue flying in more temporal terms—either that their current lifestyle will not last forever, or that they plan to cut back on their carbon footprint in the future. For example, Peter explains that three times per month, he goes to a foreign city for a meeting and returns to his home city in 1 day, but this is not going to persist forever. He reasons that this is simply part of his job for now, and that, like many others, there is “no other option.” Before the Covid-19 pandemic, he realized that online conferences were not yet developed in such a way that his colleagues were easily accessible. He alludes to the feeling of place-lag when describing his flying as just “like going to another conference room, but then taking the plane to do that.” In some situations, making plans for the *future* help as a way to justify flying in the present or to assuage current concerns with excess carbon expenditure.

Maite similarly projects responsible behavior into the future. She explains: “I talked to my friend about my future and I told her, maybe I can do this for only one or two more years. My plan is to become a teacher again, because I have been a teacher at a university [before] and close by my house there is the [applied sciences college]. We make jokes about it. I say for example that I am flying now, I am destroying the whole world, but after that, when I am a teacher, I only have to walk one kilometre to work.” This is also a common way of dealing with the situation for respondents who live separately from their partners. They describe flying back and forth to see each other as a short-term solution, but *in the future*, they will most likely live in one fixed place.

For this same reason, Joost tries to cut down on traveling now. He does not go away for short weekend trips with his girlfriend anymore, which was something he regularly did over the past 2 years. However, he says he still wants to take the opportunity to go to Australia, and apparently that is where the trade-off stops.

Again, this is temporal deferral; several short-haul trips with ZipAir can be sacrificed to “save up” for one long-haul flight. Here we see how temporary *immobility* (Adey, 2006) is used to create space for other kinds of mobility, such as being able to travel much further later (Joost flying to Australia from Europe), or for more movement in one's career (Maite making a career change and becoming a teacher). This temporal deferral of flight can be seen as a kind of debt into the future. While we do not know for sure whether Maite will end up settling down in one fixed place, these delayed aspirations reflect strategies to deal with the flyers' dilemma in the current social and environmental milieu. This current milieu is perceived by these mostly middle-class white Europeans as becoming increasingly precarious when it comes to the stability of climate, labor, and social relationships.

## Conclusion: “I want to do more”

The convenience of flying short-haul with an LCC like ZipAir still trumps less carbon-heavy modes of transport for our participants, who continue to maintain (and justify) their far-flung economic and social connections in an increasingly volatile world. However, perhaps something *is* happening, at least among these sustainably minded individuals who fly frequently. We have shown in this chapter that an increasing awareness about consumer waste and climate change contributes to the flyers' dilemma, where our respondents begin to feel like they are hitting the threshold of their consumption practices. They constantly weigh, pick, and choose different consumption practices against each other to deal with this dilemma or to assuage guilt. However, as it has become “just like waiting for a bus,” the normalization of LCC air travel as just another consumption option may make it even *more* likely that our respondents will widen their portfolio of sustainable consumption practices. As Emily says, “if I decide to keep on flying, *I want to do more*: literally plant trees at a tree nursery, or, every time I fly, count the kilometres and check how much CO<sub>2</sub> emission there was and see if I can compensate for that myself.” The very process of dealing with the dilemma shifts consumption choices from individual responsibility to a wider social and environmental arena.

Whether or not Emily or any of our other respondents will actually stop or significantly cut down on flying is therefore yet to be seen. However, the research for this chapter was conducted during a peculiar time of transition—record numbers of passenger numbers in 2019–20, followed by a massive curb on the entire aviation industry as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold. Of course, it is impossible to predict what will happen in the near future—will the Covid-19 crisis provide a path for intra-Europe high-speed train travel to become cheaper and more accessible, or will it make online forms of copresence more desirable? Will the end of the pandemic enable a steady

resurgence in air travel as people seize the opportunity to fly again? Or will the reasoning that flying is a necessity for work begins to erode? As this chapter has provided an ethnographic glimpse of a relatively small group of respondents who fly with just one carrier, a follow-up study with our respondents in 1 or 2 years would shed more light on the matter. Further research with other sustainably minded frequent flyers in different locations around the world, with different types of air travel (long-haul, business, leisure), and among different groups of respondents (migrants, students, business people) would help obtain a broader picture of the transformations in the relationship between environmental awareness and air travel. If indeed, the normalization of air travel as part of daily consumption leads to *more* engagement with sustainable practices, it would be worthwhile to pursue to what extent and how efficacious these engagements occur, especially against the serious backdrop of future climate change.

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