Title: 'THEY DID WHAT?' Air Travel Passenger-shaming Representations on Facebook and Instagram

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Abstract:
Despite the 'mobility turn' now an accepted paradigm in tourism studies, there still remains little scholarly work on the experience of air travel. As with other forms of travel, air travel is not a non-event but a complex social activity with 'social issues of norms, power, identity and culture formation' (Jensen, 2009, p. xv). The democratisation of air travel has meant passengers have become more heterogeneous with the consequence that the 'etiquette' of air travel is often contested. In a confined space for sometimes up to 18 hours, passengers observe each other and interact, some transgressing what others consider socially appropriate behaviour. This paper takes a discursive approach, examining incidences of socially transgressive behaviour posted on social media, namely, Facebook and Instagram PassengerShaming sites, from June to December 2018. We identified the behaviours being 'shamed' in the posts and the number of comments they generated. Since 'discourse builds objects, worlds, minds and social relations' (Wetherell et al., 2001, p. 16), we considered how social media posts actively construct knowledge and social relations. We identified themes and categories of posts and how much attention was being given to each in terms of the number of comments it attracted.

Our findings indicated that shameful behaviours were deemed 'disgusting' or 'an insult to human dignity'. These behaviours included: placing dirty feet on the tray table or another passenger's seat, giving oneself a pedicure in flight, placing a child on a potty in the aisle, allowing children to draw on the tray table or wall of the plane and refusing to sit near an elderly woman of colour. Not only were the behaviours in themselves considered offensive but also the sense of entitlement and disregard for fellow passengers exhibited by the 'violators'. The findings confirm previous work by Small and Harris (2012; 2014) that the airline experience is embodied, interconnected and contested. Public shaming was seen to be a means to enforce cultural skills (to be an airline passenger) which were seen to be lacking in some passengers. And yet one can see the posts moving beyond shaming into the space of harassment and bullying with an ever-escalating discourse of class distinction exhibited in the posts.

The posts while engaging in the rhetoric of criticism, are in fact complicit in maintaining a discourse that elevates the complaint whose 'rights' have been violated. The focus on passenger co-creation in terms of the 'violators' and 'violated' by bad behaviour also serves to excuse the airline in failing to prevent or manage the violations. As highlighted in the 'crying babies on planes' and 'obesity and air travel' debates, these findings highlight the rights of one person's embodiment versus another's.

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