

Examining consumer behaviour through a new type of tourism service

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From March 2020, the pandemic situation and the gradual tightening of the rules have put the tourism sector in an increasingly difficult situation (Ramelli and Wagner, 2020). One of its service sectors, aviation, also fell victim to the restrictions at global level, so that in the spring, airports and terminals were empty of tourists instead of the crowds they had been (Zenker and Kock, 2020). In Hungary, the summer of 2020 saw the opening up of the country, thanks to a drop in the number of infected cases, and the return of air travel as a means of tourist transport, albeit in smaller numbers. During this period, those who had lower negative emotions, a higher willingness to take risks, and a higher level of sensation-seeking seemed to intend to travel better, even if they had an opportunity for it (Torres *et al.*, 2021). In October 2020, during the period of restrictions, the flight-to-nowhere service was launched, with the slogan “Come with us, we are not going anywhere”, which also referred to the event’s sensation-based program (Kaszás, 2020). Smartwings, the airline responsible for the service, has been able to fly people without putting them in mandatory quarantine, while complying with regulations (wearing masks, keeping their distance, hand sanitizer). All this was possible because the aircraft, which took off from Liszt Ferenc International Airport with the passengers, did not land in a foreign country, nor even fly over other countries (Kaszás, 2020). Initially, virtual journeys were organized in China, Taiwan and Japan, and then Australia’s Qantas Airlines became the first airline in the world to organize a flight-to-nowhere event – the Hungarian event was the first in Europe – (Street, 2020). Such a solution creates the illusion of travel, with flights actually taking place in the program, while the safety and sensationalism of this alternative idea could eliminate the high risk perception of travelers (Su *et al.*, 2021) during the pandemic period. Thus providing an opportunity (or illusion) for those who would otherwise travel only to be denied by closures.

The purpose of this research is to investigate factors influencing the repurchase intention of flight-to-nowhere service. We investigated how escapism and aesthetic experiences influenced repurchase intention. We also investigated the moderating effects of temporal illusion, a concept that has received little attention in the tourism literature. Our research adds to the limited literature on flight-to-nowhere services, a recent innovation in the aviation industry in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, by investigating the services in the context of Hungarians, who are underrepresented in tourism literature.

The most common and easiest way for people to experience something is through their senses, their emotions. Even the earliest works on experience strongly emphasize its hedonistic,

pleasure (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982) and sensory-emotional (Pine and Gilmore 1999) character. Pine and Gilmore's (1998) concept of the experience economy focuses on highlighting the elements of experience that can provide a competitive advantage for service providers. Based on combinations of immersion and absorption, activity and passivity, they identified the factors that create competitive advantage along four components: education, entertainment, aesthetics and escapism. Furthermore, they found that it is important for service providers to achieve memorable experiences with their services, as several previous studies have shown that consumers' past memories and experiences are essential factors for positive feedback and subsequent revisits (Tung and Ritchie, 2011, Manthiou *et al.*, 2014). The experience of tourism, influenced by several factors, then leads to satisfaction or dissatisfaction, which are direct influences on the intention to recommend and repurchase (Maunier and Camelis, 2013). When a positive or negative word of mouth about a brand or a product or service is launched in online communities, it can sweep through like an avalanche and completely change the previous market (Bughin *et al.*, 2010). The third theoretical area of our research relates to the temporal illusion. The efficient use of time, planning and organization processes are the most prominent ones. Temporal illusion investigates these temporal changes in personality (Kim and Geistfeld, 2007). According to Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), these perspectives determine the way an individual feels, acts, thinks, and gives meaning to or experiences the moments and events that shape our lives. In doing so, they enhance or restrain the subsequent positive or negative perception of the event experienced.

This research supports the positive effect of escapism on repurchase intention (H1). In other words, customers who have used a flight-to-nowhere service may reconsider repurchasing it in the future because it has the potential to distract them from their daily problems. The findings add weight to previous research and broaden the scope of the relationship between the two variables as demonstrated in different contexts such as hotels, Chang *et al.* (2019), restaurants (Chua *et al.*, 2014), retail stores (Yoon and Oh, 2016), and mobile applications (Huang *et al.*, 2019).

This research supports the positive effect of aesthetic on repurchase intention (H2). Customers who have used a flight-to-nowhere service may reconsider repurchasing it in the future due to the aesthetic value that air travel can provide. The findings add weight to previous research and broaden the scope of the relationship between the two variables as demonstrated in different contexts such as technological products (Park *et al.*, 2013), restaurants (Chua *et al.*, 2014), apparels (Overmars and Poels, 2015), cruise travels (Calza *et al.*, 2020), lodgings (Fu and Wang, 2020).

This research cannot support the moderating effect of temporal illusion on the relationship between escapism and repurchase intention (H3). The nature of escapism is to divert one's attention away from reality by immersing oneself in enjoyable and entertaining activities (indulgence). We argue that being fully immersed in traveling (mobility) activities negates the effect of temporal illusion, which is the perception of time as being still (frozen), broken, chopped up, and without direction.

This research supports the moderating effect of temporal illusion on the relationship between aesthetic and repurchase intention (H4). The results suggest that temporal illusion weakens the positive association between aesthetic and repurchase intention. Customers who experienced time distortions were generally dissatisfied with the service processes (Tom and Lucey, 1995; Law *et al.*, 2004; Bielen and Demoulin, 2007; Zhang and Shao, 2019), resulting in lower behavioural intentions (Li *et al.*, 2021; Mainardes *et al.*, 2021).

Some theoretical contributions of this research are as follows: first, previous studies in hospitality and tourism did not examine the direct effects of escapism and aesthetic on

behavioural intention (e.g., repurchase/re-patronage/revisit and recommend intentions); rather, the relationships were usually mediated by satisfaction (e.g., Lee *et al.*, 2017; Taylor Jr *et al.*, 2018; Jin *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2021). Our research closes the empirical gaps by providing evidence on the relationships among the aforementioned variables. Second, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first research to investigate the moderating effects of temporal illusion, a less explored concept in tourism literature. Third, our study provides empirical evidence for the occurrence of temporal illusion in the context of flight-to-nowhere services, a new business model in the airline industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are several managerial implications from this research: first, our research proves that escapism is a positive predictor of repurchase intention. Flight-nowhere service providers may improve the on-board service elements that help passengers distract their minds from their daily routines or problems, especially those that occur due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, our research proves that aesthetic is a positive predictor of repurchase intention. Flight-nowhere service providers may improve the interior design of the cabins and their elements, making them more aesthetically pleasing and comfortable. Finally, to reduce the effect of temporal illusion, passengers should be engaged in fun activities or provided with amenities (e.g., games, puzzles) that keep them engaged throughout the flight. Overall, such a service could be a particularly good idea at a time when airlines are finding it difficult to perform due to restrictions and have already accumulated heavy losses in Europe during the first wave of COVID-19 (Miskolczi *et al.*, 2021; Kökény *et al.*, 2022). Thus, this research can broaden the thinking on what alternative solutions to aggressive acquisitions and business restructuring (Suk and Kim, 2021) might be available in the market.