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(Don't) be ashamed during take-off and landing: negotiations of flight shame in the Norwegian public debate

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the rhetorical use, function, and public value of appeals to shame and guilt in the climate change debate. It does so through rhetorical criticism of opinion articles discussing flight shame published in Norwegian newspapers 2019–2020. The opinion articles partake in a rhetorical exchange in which the legitimacy of air travel, responsibility for mitigation efforts, and acceptability of appeals to shame and guilt are negotiated. This article examines how this negotiation happens rhetorically through argumentation and appeals to certain values and discusses how appeals to flight shame facilitate deliberation on climate change mitigation. The analysis finds that appeals to flight shame are often interpreted as attacks on “ordinary” people living in rural areas and responded to with accusations of elitist behaviour and moralising, and arguments that reframe flying as an acceptable social practice. Thus, the rhetorical use of shame can increase polarization and obstruct much-needed cooperation in tackling the challenges of climate change. However, the debate also constitutes a rhetorical examination and negotiation of issues of culpability and responsibility that invites the audience of the debate to reconsider their travel habits in relation to the issue of climate change and questions about moral responsibility and solidarity.

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Introduction

Before the summer holidays in 2019, Norway's then-prime minister, Erna Solberg, visited the national broadcaster *NRK's* debate programme *Politisk kvarter*. The journalist asked her: «Are you flying for your holidays this summer?» The prime minister replied affirmatively and added: «... and I do that completely without flight shame» (NRK, 2019). The backdrop for the journalists' question—and Solberg's response—was the public debate about the phenomenon of flight shame, which had begun a few months earlier. In Sweden, the debate had already been on the agenda for a while. Flight shame (Swedish: *flygskam*), is described as the “feeling that flying, from an environmental point of view, is a reprehensible action”, and it was accepted as a new word by the Swedish language council after it frequently appeared in the public debate in 2018 (ISO, 2019). The neologism quickly gained traction in public debates outside of Sweden, drawing negative attention to aviation as a major and fast-growing source of greenhouse gas (GHG)

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emissions and spurring an often heated and irreconcilable debate on whether individual consumers have a moral responsibility to stop flying (Becken et al., 2021; Gössling et al., 2020, p. 2; Söderberg & Wormbs, 2019, p. 2; Mkono et al., 2020).

Erna Solberg's response to the journalist is illustrative of the public debate in Norway about environmental shame. While phrases like "flight shame" and "meat shame" circulate widely in the public debate, it appears important to politicians and citizens to distance themselves from these words. Like Solberg, the opposition leader (and current prime minister) Jonas Gahr Støre publicly denied feeling ashamed of flying. The leader of the agrarian party, Trygve Slagsvold Vedum, went so far as to introduce a counterword to meat shame, namely "ribbeglede", literally "ribs joy" (NTB, 2019). Norwegian politicians are not alone in rejecting the appeal to shame: the majority of Norwegians claim not to feel any flight shame (Doran et al., 2021). Moreover, many oppose the use of shame appeals in the climate debate because they view such appeals as negative, only used to attack others (Fløttum et al., 2021, p. 8).

This article explores how appeals to environmental shame are engaged and negotiated in the public debate. More precisely, the article examines how appeals to flight shame have been used and rejected in opinion articles published in Norwegian newspapers in 2019–2020. The analysis pays attention to how this negotiation happens rhetorically through argumentation and appeals to certain norms and values, and discusses how these rhetorical actions facilitate public deliberation on climate change mitigation.

While the article aims to contribute to discussions about the rhetorical use and social function of shame and guilt appeals in the climate debate in general, it looks specifically at flight shame. It does so, because this debate appears highly conflictual, often manifesting as a centre-periphery conflict that traditionally has been at the core of Norwegian political discourse (Rokkan, 1999). Moreover, although most Norwegians say that they are willing to reduce their carbon footprint, Norwegians continue to fly more than most people in the world (Skjellum Aas, 2021).

The article begins by discussing current studies that consider how flight shame has been debated in various contexts, and the potential for shame and guilt to motivate people to take environmental action.

Environmental shame and guilt

Flight shame has taken a central position in public debates about climate change in many countries, spurring discussion about whether individual consumers have a moral responsibility to reduce their frequency of air travel (Becken et al., 2021; Gössling et al., 2020, p. 2; Söderberg & Wormbs, 2019, p. 2). The neologism "flight shame" occurred in the context of increased global awareness of the consequences that human-made climate change will have for life on earth. The climate movement "Fridays for Future" mobilised millions of youths to demonstrate against political inaction and in favour of solving the climate crisis, receiving massive media attention (de Moor et al., 2021). The movement also helped raise awareness of the responsibility of individuals to reduce emissions (Gössling et al., 2020, p. 1), and Greta Thunberg's anti-flying campaign leading up to the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit drew attention to air travel as a significant source of emissions (Mkono et al., 2020).

A substantial part of the flight shame debate takes in comment sections on social media platforms, where participation often happens in the form of approval or disapproval, i.e., a rhetoric of praise or blame (Andersen, 2020, pp. 208–214). These debates contain many accusations aimed at public persons for flying unnecessarily, especially if they are otherwise promoting climate action (Becken et al., 2021, p. 1458). Social media accounts dedicated to public shaming of influencers boasting about their excessive flying have emerged, for instance, the Swedish Instagram account @aningslosainfluencers, literally "clueless influencers" (Larsson, 2019).

The polarising potential of such debates is evident in Mkono et al. (2020)'s study of social media responses to Greta Thunberg's anti-flying campaign. They found that most commentators were critical and dismissive of Thunberg's anti-flying message, often attacking her person and her credibility (see also Elgesem & Felde, 2021). Negative sentiments towards the flight shame movement have also been observed in a study of online discussions about tourism and eco-shame and eco-guilt (Mkono & Hughes, 2020, pp. 1231–1232). However, Mkono et al. (2020) also found a substantial number of positive posts that praised Thunberg and her anti-flying message as inspirational and timely.

In contrast, a study of Twitter discussions about flight shame found little evidence of these debates playing out as ideological contestations between opposing groups (Becken et al., 2021). Although objections to and rejections of flight shame as a feeling and concept were also present, most Twitter users used the neologism to express support for climate advocacy and activism and to advance more sustainable travel alternatives. Similarly, Mkono and Hughes (2020) also found that expressions of eco-guilt and eco-shame were used to express a desire to travel more sustainably. However, these intentions rarely resulted in real-life environmental action. Instead, various barriers to action, such as confusion about the mitigation effects of various consumer choices, obstructed the travellers' good intentions from being put into action (Mkono & Hughes, 2020).

As shame and guilt increasingly resonate in environmental communication (Jensen, 2019), a growing body of work deals with how these emotions motivate or obstruct pro-environmental behaviour. Regarding the difference between shame and guilt, the social psychologists Tangney and Dearing (2002) argued convincingly that

the fundamental difference between shame and guilt centers on the role of the self. Shame involves fairly global, negative evaluations of the self (i.e., 'Who I am'). Guilt involves a more articulated condemnation of a specific behaviour (i.e., 'What I did'). [p. 24, emphases in original]

Thus, the feeling expressed through the phrase "flight shame" is perhaps best described as a form of guilt: it concerns something one *does* that harms the environment. Although the two emotions may be experienced differently, Tangney and Dearing (2002, p. 11) also argued that it is often difficult to define the two emotions in a way that offers a meaningful and consistent distinction. Guilt and shame may be felt simultaneously, and one feeling may intensify and energise the other. Doing wrong can make us regret our actions as well as who we are for acting that way (Oxfeldt, 2018).

Psychological research has primarily examined how appeals to environmental guilt motivate action. While some studies have found that appeals to environmental guilt motivate pro-environmental behaviour (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010; Harth et al., 2013; Mallett, 2012; Swim & Bloodhart, 2013), other studies have found such appeals to be counterproductive in motivating mitigating action, especially when the action involves sacrifice (Dannenberg et al., 2012; Moser, 2007).

In the context of tourism, research has investigated the possibility of environmental guilt and shame to change consumption patterns. A survey of more than 6000 respondents in the US, UK, Germany, and France found flight shame to have a considerable effect on people's behaviour, with more than one-fifth of the respondents having reduced their flying frequency out of concern about climate change (Locker, 2019).

In a panel study of German citizens, Gössling et al. (2020) found that although most participants had not changed their travel behaviour, the majority supported policy and legislation forcing airlines to reduce their emissions, as well as market-based measures to make flights more expensive. The study also found an increased awareness of the impacts of air travel on the environment and a corresponding change in social norms, where frequent air travel is less associated with high status than it has been previously.

In Sweden, where the neologism *flygskam* first emerged, one in four people stated that they had avoided air travel to reduce their carbon footprint (WWF, 2019). In Norway, no similar effect was observed (Frøslund, 2019), and in a survey, more than 70 per cent of Norwegians stated that they did not feel any flight shame (Doran et al., 2021). However, another survey found a notable increase in the number of respondents who believed that their social circle thinks that one should fly less often, and this trend was particularly notable among the youngest respondents (Aasen et al., 2019, pp. 18; 29–30).

Social norms are, in turn, an important predictor of feelings of flight shame, actual flight activity, and opinions about policy and legislation aimed at restricting air traffic (Doran et al., 2021; Gösling et al., 2020; Söderberg & Wormbs, 2019). Flight shame is also associated with personal norms: people who feel a personal moral obligation to contribute to climate change mitigation are more likely than others to experience feelings of flight shame (Doran et al., 2021) and to choose to stay on the ground (Büchs, 2017; Jacobson et al., 2020; Wormbs & Söderberg, 2021).

The ambiguous findings about the possible effects of the appeal to flight shame on travellers' attitudes and behaviours call for more studies about how people perceive and respond to appeals to environmental shame. In what follows, a rhetorical framework for describing and interpreting the various rhetorical functions of appeals to shame is suggested. This framework pays particular attention to how shame appeals' contributions to public deliberation can be examined and evaluated.

The rhetoric of shame

Public debates, including the debate about flight shame, seldom concern the feelings of the actors involved. Instead, public debates involving shame usually concern whether one *should* feel shame, *who* should feel ashamed, and how one should act upon this feeling. Consequently, appeals to shame should not primarily be seen as psychological expressions but rather as “emotionally charged [rhetorical] actions involved in a rhetorical negotiation about norms and values, behaviours, and politics” (Kjeldsen, 2020, p. 122, author's translation).

The study of rhetoric is the study of how people use communication to influence others in situations requiring decision-making. Rhetorical studies explore how people argue and use other means of influence, such as praise, blame, accusations, and so on, to gain the adherence of an audience. Additionally, rhetorical studies aim to understand the effects and consequences of rhetorical messages as they act upon hearers' and readers' minds. In particular, rhetorical research is concerned with understanding how rhetoric is practised and received in the public sphere and the role of democratic citizens as participants in, and receivers of, public and political rhetoric (Kjeldsen, 2021, p. 9; see also Kock & Villadsen, 2017).

A rhetorical approach to emotions examines how emotions are expressed and evoked through communication and with what rhetorical effect. In rhetorical theory, emotions are thought to be judgements and motivators of action (Aristotle, 2007), and are considered legitimate and necessary in public life and democratic debate (e.g. Condit, 2018; Hariman & Lucaites, 2001). However, like all rhetorical practice, appeals to emotions are contingent and situated, entailing that the effects and consequences of such appeals will vary in different contexts and with different audiences (Kjeldsen, 2017, 85–86; 314–319).

Unsurprisingly, current scholarship contains conflicting positions on the rhetorical effect and public value of shame appeals (for an overview of some of these positions, see Tarnopolsky, 2010, pp. 1–16). On the one hand, shame appeals may be unethical, because they can be used to dominate and stigmatise others, thus, threatening to isolate already marginalised groups from the public realm (Ås, 2004; Tarnopolsky, 2010). Moreover, shame appeals can be ineffective in gaining the audience's adherence, as they are often received as acts of condemnation performed from a position of perceived moral superiority (Andersen, 2020, pp. 220–230; Every, 2013;

Fløttum et al., 2021, p. 8; Kjeldsen, 2020). Rather than moving the shamed to change their behaviour, such attempts at influence often lead the accused to fight back, attacking the moral character of the shamer (Andersen, 2020, pp. 220–230; Every, 2013; Kjeldsen, 2020). In this way, shame appeals may obstruct possibilities for mutual understanding and cooperation and increase polarization around the given issue.

On the other hand, shame appeals may be understood as necessary regulators of behaviour in the political community that contribute to positive self-reflection and maintenance of social norms, values, and social cohesion (Ahmed, 2014; Tarnopolsky, 2010; Villadsen, 2019). The desire to be without shame and guilt regulates our behaviour, preventing us from engaging in behaviours that society views as reprehensible. Whereas the fear of shame prevents us from betraying the community's ideals, the experience of shame reminds us of the reasons for those ideals in the first place (Ahmed, 2014, p. 106). Feeling shame can be understood as an admission of failure in living up to the community's ideals that mobilise critical self-reflection as a necessary counterweight to absolute belief in one's own infallibility (Tarnopolsky, 2010). Therefore, shame can be seen as an emotional reaction that affirms one's adherence to the ideal that one has betrayed, and one's identification with and care for the community that one has let down (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 106–108).

Rhetorical appeals to shame should be understood as verbal attempts to evoke an emotional condition in the audience and, in so doing, move the audience to change their attitudes or actions. Such attempts at influence are based in the perception that the audience shares, or should share, norms and values that have been violated. Through the shame appeal, the speaker seeks an emotional recognition of the validity of these norms and values (Kjeldsen, 2020, p. 117). However, since an accusation of shameful behaviour is a judgement, shame appeals can also be a rhetorical means to attack and dominate the target of the accusation (Kjeldsen, 2020, p. 117).

Kjeldsen (2020, pp. 122–125) suggests that rhetorical shame appeals can perform four different functions, namely, *to admit individual shame; to admit shame on behalf of a collective; to inflict shame upon an individual; or to inflict shame upon a collective*. An admission of individual or collective shame functions as a (self-)accusation, in which the speaker admits to having violated norms and values, individually or as part of a collective, recognises these norms and values as valid, and pleads for forgiveness (Kjeldsen, 2020, p. 122). The infliction of shame upon an individual or a collective functions as an accusation of others, in which the speaker accuses others of violating norms and values and tells them to be ashamed. Additionally, the shame appeal may be rejected (Kjeldsen, 2020). The rejection of an appeal to shame functions as a defence that objects either to the claim that norms and values have been violated, or to the validity of these norms and values.

What follows is an account of the material studied in this article, followed by an elaboration of the rhetorical approach that constitutes the analytical backbone of the study.

Material and method

The study is a rhetorical analysis of opinion articles from four Norwegian newspapers published in 2019–2020 in which flight shame is discussed. The articles were collected by searching the newspaper database Retriever A-TEKST. First, all articles containing the Norwegian word *flyskam* in national, regional and local newspapers from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2020 were identified, resulting in 1549 articles in 114 different outlets. The data collection was limited to this period because, as initial searches showed (Figure 1), it was mainly in this period that the concept of flight shame was discussed in the Norwegian press.

The material was then narrowed down to four newspapers with different coverage areas, readerships, and ideological positions among the ten outlets that had the most mentions of flight shame. Because this study aims to examine how positions on flight shame are negotiated,

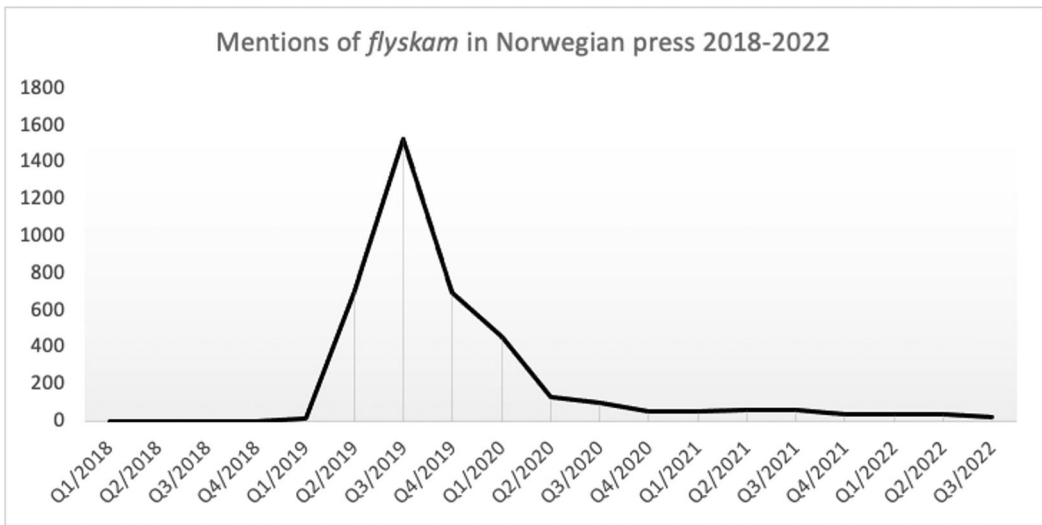


Figure 1. Newspaper coverage of flight shame over time. Retriever archive analysis conducted on 1 August 2022 (query word: *flyskam*, period 1 January 2018 to 1 August 2022, all newspapers).

Table 1. Description of the material. Only opinion articles were analysed in this study. *Rank here refers to how the newspaper ranks in the overall list of newspapers sorted by numbers of articles mentioning *flyskam*.

Newspaper	Description	Rank*	Articles, total	Opinion articles
<i>Dagsavisen</i>	Social-democratic daily quality newspaper with national coverage	1	93	12
<i>Finansavisen</i>	Right-wing, neoliberal daily business paper with national coverage	3	73	12
<i>VG</i>	Norway's most-read tabloid, national coverage	7	43	11
<i>Nordlys</i>	Regional daily covering Northern Norway	10	38	5

Table 2. Analytical framework for categorising positions and rhetorical functions in the material. The categories developed are not mutually exclusive, as several rhetorical actions may be performed within the same article.

Position	Rhetorical action	Example
Support of flight shame	Admit individual shame	I am ashamed of flying
	Admit collective shame	Many of us are ashamed of flying
	Inflict shame upon individual	You/she/he should feel ashamed of flying
	Inflict shame upon collective	Norwegians should feel ashamed of their excessive flying
Disapproval of flight shame	Reject appeal to shame	Shame appeals are unethical and/or ineffective rhetorical means
	Reject feeling ashamed of flying	I am not ashamed of flying

only opinion articles (editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor) in which flight shame was the main theme were included in the material, resulting in a selection of 40 articles (Table 1).

Methodologically, the analysis consisted of categorisation and rhetorical criticism of these opinion articles. The framework presented in Table 2 accounts for the first step in the analysis, where the positions and rhetorical actions performed through the appeal to flight shame were identified.

"Categories" are here understood as "[t]ags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the ... inferential information compiled during a study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). This definition entails that the categories are primarily an analytical tool allowing the researcher to capture and name something salient, typical or prominent in the texts, and to sort and organise these findings for analytical purposes. The primary analytical approach is a rhetorical criticism that moves beyond identifying and categorising the shame appeal's linguistic functions in each article to critically investigate the social functions of the debate as a whole.

Rhetorical criticism is an interpretive practice conducted in a hermeneutic movement between the text, the context, the critic's interpretation of the text, and the rhetorical concepts that guide this interpretation (Leff, 1980, p. 345). This entails that the collected debate articles are considered as one single text, i.e. as a public rhetorical exchange about flight shame. Interpretative reflexive movements are used to examine the text from the perspective of the text's implied audience to establish how the text invites a particular response from the audience (Ceccarelli, 2001, pp. 6–7). In doing so, the analysis explores the rhetorical functions and public value of appeals to flight shame, i.e. how the rhetorical use of such appeals enables or obstructs an informative debate that enables audiences to reflect upon and choose between conflicting positions (Kock, 2018), and how the debate enhances or diminishes our possibilities to “live together productively under conditions of dissensus” (Kock & Villadsen, 2017, pp. 573–574).

Therefore, the analysis examines how the shame appeal contributes to deliberative argumentation on how the challenges of climate change should be tackled. Furthermore, the analysis explores how the shame appeal contributes to an examination and negotiation of the national community's norms and values through an *epideictic rhetoric* of verbal displays and praise of shared values and the condemning of opposing values (Aristotle, 2007, Book 1, Ch. 9; Condit, 1985; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971; 47–51). This type of rhetoric differs in aim and function from deliberative rhetoric, where the goal is to advocate or deliberate a specific viewpoint or action, inviting the audience to reflect upon and choose between conflicting options (Kock, 2018). In contrast, epideictic rhetoric seeks the audience's adherence to the values lauded by the speaker (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, p. 50). Thus, functions associated with epideictic rhetoric are reinforcing or altering the community and its constitutive values (Condit, 1985; Sheard, 1996).

Rhetorical criticism is an interpretive endeavour that “mediates between the experience of the critic and the forms of experience expressed in the text” (Leff, 1980, p. 345). Consequently, rhetorical criticism does not claim to be an objective endeavour, and quantitative claims about validity and representativity are unusual (Kuypers, 2009, pp. 29–32). Nevertheless, the critic aims to approach the text with a “detached curiosity”, allowing thorough, open-minded, and fair readings of the text to form the basis for the argumentative interpretation of it (Kuypers, 2009, p. 24).

Moreover, the critic's interpretation of the text's meaning and mode of operation is made in a hermeneutic movement between the text and the context, which necessarily shapes and influences the text's meaning and mode of operation and the associated interpretations of it. Accordingly, the analysis presented in this article first accounts for the situational particularities likely to influence the nature of the flight shame debate and its deliberative functions.

Flight shame in Norway

Most Norwegians express a high level of awareness of the consequences of climate change and show a willingness to take measures to reduce their carbon footprint (Fløttum, 2017). At the same time, Norwegians fly more than just about anyone else in the world (Høyer, 2000; Skjellum Aas, 2021), and it has been suggested that the flight shame movement has had minimal effect on Norwegians' travel habits (Frøslund, 2019).

Norway is characterised by vast distances between most places, especially in the Northern parts of the country, and lack of affordable and efficient public transportation may make it difficult for many to stop flying. Still, some of the most highly-trafficked routes are between destinations within Norway that have other, less emission-intensive alternatives, and from Norway to popular tourist destinations outside of Norway (Kristiansen, 2017, p. 4). Despite high levels of awareness of, and concern for, air travel's contribution to climate change, an interview study found Norwegians to be unwilling to reduce their frequency of long-haul air travel to tourist

destinations (Higham & Cohen, 2011). An important explanation for this unwillingness was that many were unable to adequately recognise or understand their contribution to human-induced climate change (Higham & Cohen, 2011, p. 102)—a tendency also observed in other studies of Norwegian’s attitudes towards climate change and lifestyle matters (Langaas et al., 2019, pp. 7–8; Tvinnereim et al., 2017, pp. 37–38).

While research on flight shame in Norway is limited, the existing studies suggest that most Norwegians do not feel flight shame (Doran et al., 2021), and that many view it as a negative word used to attack others (Fløttum et al., 2021, p. 8). At the same time, an increasing proportion of the public seems to feel that the social norms related to flying are changing (Aasen et al., 2019, pp. 18; 29–30).

It has been suggested that pandemic travel restrictions may have affected both dispositions towards flying and discourses about flight shame (Becken et al., 2021; O’Connor & Assaker, 2022). A study from Norway found evidence of increased support for policy aimed at reducing air travel during the pandemic. However, the level of support was considerably higher when policy was aimed at reducing the spread of the virus rather than reducing GHG emissions (Kallbekken & Saelen, 2021). In the Norwegian press, the only visible effect of the pandemic on the flight shame debate is that it faded away around the time of the first national virus outbreak and the subsequent lock-down in March 2020 (see Figure 1).

Whereas the debate studied here takes place in the newspaper columns, existing studies of public debates about flight shame have mainly examined discussions on social media (Becken et al., 2021; Larsson, 2019; Mkono & Hughes, 2020; Mkono et al., 2020). In contrast to social media’s affordances that enable participants to respond directly and immediately to the comments of others, immediate and direct interaction is not afforded by these columns. While some debate articles are articulated as direct responses to other debate articles, most debaters do not address each other directly. Nevertheless, the mediated debate about flight shame unfolds as a rhetorical exchange in which participants voice different views on the same matter, thereby engaging in a joint examination and negotiation of the issue in front of an audience.

All participants in this exchange acknowledge climate change as a problem—most also acknowledge that air travel is a part of this problem. Nevertheless, most reject the appeal to flight shame (see Table 3). While some debaters reject *feeling* ashamed, most debaters reject the claim that they *should* feel ashamed, thus questioning the legitimacy of the appeal to flight shame. Some debaters support the appeal to flight shame, either by admitting feeling shame in relation to flying or by inflicting shame upon others.

There are some differences among the publications, most notably, the total absence of debaters in *Finansavisen* who support the notion of flight shame. This absence may be a consequence of the newspaper’s political stance as a right-wing neoliberal newspaper. It has been

Table 3. Positions and rhetorical functions in the debate about flight shame.

Position	Rhetorical function	Instances by publication
Support of flight shame	Admit individual shame	<i>Dagsavisen</i> : 2
	Admit collective shame	<i>Dagsavisen</i> : 3
		VG: 3
	Inflict shame upon individual	VG: 1
	Inflict shame upon collective	<i>Dagsavisen</i> : 3
		<i>Nordlys</i> : 3
		VG: 7
Disapproval of flight shame	Rejects the appeal to shame	<i>Dagsavisen</i> : 6
		<i>Finansavisen</i> : 3
		<i>Nordlys</i> : 7
		VG: 5
	Rejects personally feeling ashamed	<i>Dagsavisen</i> : 1
		<i>Finansavisen</i> : 4
		<i>Nordlys</i> : 3
		VG: 3

suggested that supporters of right-wing parties and policies are more sceptical than others about the severity of climate change and less in favour of policies to tackle climate change (Lockwood, 2018; Yan et al., 2021). While emphasising individual responsibility to act to save the planet, positing that sustainability can be achieved through “private, individual, well-intentioned consumer choice” (Maniates, 2001, p. 58), a neoliberal stance often entails a strong belief that technological innovations will transform the market, allowing economic growth to continue without consumers having to change their lifestyles (Randall, 2009, pp. 119–120).

Debaters supporting the notion of flight shame are also few in *Nordlys*, which could result from the newspaper’s geographic location and coverage area. Northern Norway is considered peripheral and geographically distant from the capital and other large cities in Norway. In the north, the distances between the towns and villages are also considerable, and most places are not connected to a railway line. Thus, for many Norwegians living in the north, flying is the only feasible transportation option.

Arguing about anti-flying as a mitigation measure

Debaters justify their position on flight shame by giving arguments for or against the necessity and desirability of reducing the frequency of air travel. Often, conflicting positions are defended through arguments grounded in the same *topoi* (singular: *topos*), meaning that the arguments are collected from the same cognitive and discursive common places (Aristotle, 1976; see also Wormbs & Söderberg, 2021, p. 316).

For instance, debaters who reject flight shame justify their position by questioning the mitigation effect of reduced air traffic. They do so by comparing flying to other emission-intensive activities, including leisure boats, cars, the building of railroads, military operations, and so forth. On the one hand, these comparisons serve to question the effect of reducing the number of one’s flights. On the other hand, they function to accuse those advocating flight shame of hypocrisy: “Sensible people tell us to feel flight or meat shame. At the same time, they support a defence policy, which in the climate budget makes commercial aviation a tiny mouse compared to the military industry” (Svare, 2019).¹

Similar comparisons are used by debaters who admit shame or inflict this shame upon others, arguing that the mitigation effect of reduced air traffic is substantial. In contrast to rejections of shame, these arguments are usually supported by research. For example:

Whether we look at individuals’ abilities to reduce their climate footprint or the most important measures to reduce emissions globally, travel and a more plant-based diet are very high on the list. Wynes and Nicholas 2017, for example, have found that by far the most effective measures individuals can take (in addition to having fewer children) are to reduce car and air travel as well as to eat more plant-based food. [Hager, 2019]

Another prevalent *topos*, used to argue both positions, is the idea that it is possible to offset emissions from flying with money or by reducing other emissions. In rejections of flight shame, this *topos* materialises in suggestions like “we could perhaps compensate a little for unnecessary flights by jumping on the bike when we are back home” (Larsen, 2019) or that “instead of speaking about shame, people can pay for what they do” (Meland, 2019). By contrast, advocates of flight shame argue that “[n]ot eating meatballs or choosing an electric car does not help if you release thousands of tons of CO₂ on your holiday trip” (Traedal, 2019a).

A third *topos* frequently applied both in argumentation for and against flight shame concerns what can be achieved through technological development. A common argument against anti-flying as a mitigation measure is that technological development will make the aviation industry sustainable in the future. Arguments from this *topos* often invoke an ideology of continued growth and development: “Hopefully, we can travel by electric planes in Norway in the future and flight shame will become a foreign word. After all, no one thinks we should substitute the

car for a horse and carriage” (Bru, 2019). Some even argue that, since the transition to a green aviation industry is expensive, we need to continue flying now to give the industry the financial muscles needed to make this transition in the future: “Aeroplanes will not be out of date any-time soon. But they must become sustainable. This transition costs. And for that, the aviation industry needs an income” (Angell Jensen, 2019b). Debaters advocating flight avoidance as a mitigation measure contest these claims, arguing that the challenges of climate change cannot be solved through technological innovation alone: “the aviation industry’s greenness still only consists of some pieces of grass on the runway. Even biofuel will not be able to cover more than a fraction of the aviation industry’s energy need” (Hermstad, 2019).

A fourth topos, commonly employed by debaters advocating flight avoidance but also present in rejections of flight shame, is a comparison between the responsibility of individuals versus the responsibility of the political system to act on the challenge of climate change. Advocates of flight avoidance as a mitigation measure usually stress that it is a political responsibility to facilitate sustainable habits. However, they argue that individuals and their actions are necessary and integral parts of social and political transformation and that such transformation is impossible without the active participation of citizens in enabling it: “politicians need the people’s support to make sufficient changes. If we are to achieve this, someone must lead the way and challenge today’s norms” (Hager, 2019; see also Bakken Riise, 2019; Roum, 2019; Saether, 2019; Traedal, 2019a).

In rejections of flight shame, the same comparison is sometimes invoked to argue that measures must be taken on a higher level, that is, by politicians or the market: “the climate crisis cannot be solved by making people feel guilty”; rather, “it must pay off to choose green” (Bru, 2019). Moreover, it is argued that flight shame is a digression that displaces the responsibility to act from the politicians to the individual, and thus represents an uneven distribution of responsibility and a harmful individualisation of the challenges related to climate change (Skorstad, 2019). While it is argued that it is a collective and political responsibility to facilitate the green transition, the arguments are typically vague regarding who bears this responsibility and what exactly should be done. An example is this rejection of claims to individual responsibility: “To inflict shame upon the individual might make individuals fly less, but it is a political, collective responsibility to make the entire society choose more sustainable travel habits” (Skorstad, 2019).

Finally, a topos only invoked by debaters rejecting flight shame is that it is not possible to stop flying because the existing alternatives are neither reasonable nor feasible:

For us in the districts, the alternatives are not many, and most people, regardless of where in Norway they live, would think a many-day journey by train would be a bit too demanding with the whole family in tow and only a few precious vacation days. (Gudmundsen, 2019)

Many of the arguments used to reject anti-flying as a measure are based on misconceptions about the size and proportions of the environmental impacts of the airline industry, exaggerated belief in technological solutions or the possibility to offset emissions, and air travel’s economic and social importance. The aviation industry has deliberately spread these misconceptions to depict itself as an environmentally conscious industry to consumers, politicians, and legislators (Gössling & Peeters, 2007). The prevalence of such arguments and topoi in the debate, which have been observed also in other studies of people’s reasoning about air travel (Higham & Cohen, 2011; Eriksson et al., 2022; Söderberg, 2022; Wormbs, 2021), suggests that the industry’s communication efforts have shaped how the issue of flight shame is discussed. The uncritical uptake and circulation of these arguments in the public debate may further obstruct an informed debate about the environmental benefits of flying less.

However, in the debate, these arguments are not uncontested. Instead, other debaters address these misconceptions and try to correct them. Thus, as a whole, the debate constitutes a deliberative examination and negotiation of the issue that enables critical reflection on flight avoidance as a mitigation measure. The disagreement about this measure demonstrates that

broad agreement that climate change is a problem that must be tackled does not imply consensus on what should be done and by whom (Fløttum, 2017). Among other things, the debate examines how responsibility for mitigation should be distributed in society and what criteria should be employed to decide which emission-intensive practices to limit or avoid. As such, the debate invites the audience to reflect upon the arguments in the issue and consider options for future climate action.

Negotiating the national community, its norms, and values

In the debate, rhetorical appeals to flight shame are used to call for a change of social norms. This change is needed, it is argued, because the habits of Norwegian travellers have an unreasonably large negative impact on the climate and the environment. This claim is supported by several arguments discussed above. The claim is also performed through an epideictic rhetoric of praise and, especially, blame. Whereas the arguments discussed above mainly serve to establish that flying is morally reprehensible, debaters use epideictic rhetoric to establish that Norwegians have a moral responsibility to abstain from this action.

In articles where flight shame is admitted on behalf of or inflicted upon a collective, the national community, with its many frequent flyers, is usually the target of the accusation. The collective of frequent flyers is accused of violating the community's norms and values, thereby failing to live up to its moral standards and identity as a modest and responsible people characterised by solidarity (cf. Bjørkdahl et al., 2021). The excessive flying habits of Norwegians is described as "one of the most extravagant examples of the world's most wealthy misspending at the expense of the world's poorest and future generations" (Traedal, 2019a). The speakers confront the audience with the unsustainability and egoism of its current way of life, thereby revealing a gap between the citizens' conduct and the community's values. Contemporary lifestyles are censured by verbally displaying common tourism practices: "Weekend trips to Europe have become common. Norwegians have favourite cafés in Brooklyn. The Instagram feed is filled with images from Tokyo, Sydney, Buenos Aires and Rome" (Traedal, 2019a). Moreover, these tourist practices are condemned as egoistic:

Why do frequent-flyers think they are entitled to yet another trip abroad when it uses CO₂ that is not theirs? What makes their particular weekend trip to London and their particular sun holiday so important that it legitimises the negative CO₂ effect for future generations? [Levin, 2019]

The audience is invited to reconsider the legitimacy of travel habits that are seldom questioned but instead considered by many as routine practice (Cocolas et al., 2021; Randles & Mander, 2009), an essential part their lifestyle and identity (Hibbert et al., 2013; Higham & Cohen, 2011; Kroesen, 2013;), and a fundamental "right" (Shaw & Thomas, 2006, p. 209). However, the debaters argue, air travel is a privilege, "not a human right" (Langleite, 2019; see also Bakken Riise, 2019; Hermstad, 2019; Traedal, 2019a). Moreover, they draw the audience's attention to the consequences of GHG emissions on other life forms, future human generations, and the world's less privileged before establishing that flight shame is felt because the awareness of these consequences "collides" with "the life we live and the way we work" (Gulli, 2019). Through an epideictic rhetoric of condemning behaviours and attitudes for conflicting with the community's moral ideals, the audience is encouraged to identify and evaluate potential gaps between current social norms and the community's traditional values (Sheard, 1996, p. 779).

Furthermore, the audience is invited to imagine and bring about the change of social norms called for by the speakers. By invoking the topos of individual versus political responsibility, a change of social norms is promoted as a prerequisite for individuals to change their behaviours, for the travel industry to change their practices, and for politicians to change their policies. Thereby, debaters appeal to the audience's sense of civic responsibility to contribute to the change needed.

While emphasising individual actions as crucial to political change, the target of the shame appeal is not mainly the individual but the collective. This becomes evident in the few articles in the material, in which debaters either admit individual shame (2 articles) or inflict shame upon another individual (1 article) (Table 3). The two debaters admitting shame both describe feeling shame when engaging in environmentally harmful activities, despite their awareness of the consequences of their actions. They characterise their shame as “self-inflicted”, i.e. a result their actions, despite knowing and intending better (Forsberg, 2019; Gulli, 2019). However, they do not plea for the audience’s forgiveness. Instead, they expand the object of shame to the collective, appealing to the audience to also feel shame: “When someone says that we should not feel shame, they are saying that we should not have to think about the consequences of our actions. I think we should do that more, not less” (Forsberg, 2019).

The debater who inflicts shame upon another individual also addresses flight shame as a political matter. The target of the accusation of shameful behaviour is the former prime minister: “Erna Solberg says she does not feel flight shame. She should” (Hermstad, 2019). However, Solberg is not told to be ashamed as an individual but as the political community’s leader: “As prime minister, Erna Solberg is responsible for a line of politics that causes five million Norwegians to fly as much as fifty million EU-citizens” (Hermstad, 2019).

In contrast to social media discussions, where flight shame has been used to confront public persons with their excessive flying (Becken et al., 2021, p. 1458; Larsson, 2019), there is little evidence in this debate that appeals to flight shame are used to accuse particular groups or individuals. Instead, debaters commonly emphasise that their intention is not to inflict shame upon others, but rather to encourage a reconsideration of an environmentally harmful practice: “Flight shame is not about inflicting destructive shame upon oneself or others but about caring about the climate and environmental issue” (Saether, 2019; see also Forsberg, 2019; Hager, 2019; Hoel, 2019; Traedal, 2019a). Thus, the accusation performed through the appeal to flight shame mainly concerns the morality of the action (flying), not the persons (air passengers), inviting the audience to reconsider the action, their own attitudes towards it, and their own behaviour (cf. Iversen & Nørremark, 2021).

Nevertheless, appeals to flight shame are frequently responded to and rejected as accusations of individuals and groups. Appeals to flight shame are rejected as hostile attacks on individuals and groups that are “small and different” (Mauno, 2020). Commonly, the shame appeal is sanctioned as an “act of domination” by an urban environmental elite who “feel morally superior” to ordinary people living in rural areas with few or no alternatives to air travel (Angell Jensen, 2019; see also Mauno, 2019; Sarromaa, 2019). The often vaguely defined group called “the urban elite” or “the environmentalists” is depicted as ignorant, self-complacent, and morally corrupt, using flight shame to “moralise over people in the rest of the country” (Grenersen, 2019; see also Angell Jensen, 2019; Meland, 2019; Sarromaa, 2019). The shamers are thus accused of elitist and immoral behaviour.

In addition, the shamers are ascribed blameworthy intentions, attitudes, and personal traits. They are ascribed with motives like the desire for status (Meland, 2019), and to appear better than the rest (Sarromaa, 2019; Larsen, 2019), while at the same time being hypocritical, since they do not oppose all activities that cause GHG emissions (Larsen, 2019; Svare, 2019; Hegnar, 2019b; Johnsen, 2019). A telling example is Sanna Sarromaa’s (2019) rejection of flight shame, in which the shamers are accused of elitism, and their climate engagement is reduced to the petty desire to appear better than the rest:

Shame is inflicted upon others to give oneself a morally higher position. If you trample on others, you elevate yourself. ... Flight shame is an instrument of power that is less about genuine climate engagement than about the elite’s desire to appear better than others. When the weekend trip to New York or Buenos Aires has become affordable to Average Joe, the elite must go further: Now, they will travel by train. On the slow and delightful train ride to Italy, the elite shows that they are better than the mob that crams itself into crowded cheap flights. ... Quite a large part of Norway is not available by train. What about people in

Hammerfest, Harstad, Kirkenes, or Alta? Should they be ashamed when flying to visit their nearest and dearest in southern Norway? Shall Oslo's trendy and urban greens inflict shame upon people from Finnmark when they visit their grandchildren in the south?

Sarromaa reframes the question of flight shame as a conflict between an urban, environmental elite and ordinary people in the periphery. She expresses indignation on behalf of this group, which, allegedly, is told to be ashamed but that is not offered any alternatives. Moreover, she ascribes blameworthy motives to this elite: they attempt to increase their status by inflicting shame upon others. The shamers are thereby ascribed illegitimate motives, modes of conduct, and identities, and they are for being illegitimate contributors to the debate.

Moreover, the moral critique performed through the appeal to flight shame is disregarded as an instance of unwarranted moralising. As discussed by the Norwegian philosopher Espen Gamlund (2021), the word *moralising* has recently acquired a negative ring. With the secularisation and liberalisation of society, individuals have increasingly become their own moral authorities, and morals have become a matter of personal taste. Consequently, no one is in the position to criticise the behaviour of others. Instead, moralising (i.e. making moral reflections and judgements) is increasingly considered to be offensive and unwarranted meddling in the private matters of others (Gamlund, 2021, pp. 27–28). This view of moralism, actualised in the sanctions of the «shamers», disregards moral critique as illegitimate. As such, it may undermine the possibilities for public debate about important moral and political questions (Andersen, 2022; Gamlund, 2021, p. 42).

Rejections of the shame appeal suggest that the rhetorical treatment of the issue through an epideictic rhetoric of blame may discourage mutual understanding and increase polarization. In these rejections, the target of blame is the individual whose identity, motives, and actions are disregarded as immoral. Whereas flight shame is mainly used to appeal to the audience's values and sense of civic responsibility and invite them to reconsider the social norms relating to flying, the speakers' performing this latter type of appeal are morally condemned. The appeal to flight shame is rejected as an instance of unwarranted moralising, and the audience is invited to participate in the condemnation, not only of the shame appeal, but also of the persons performing it.

Conclusion

The prevalence of rejections of flight shame in the public debate analysed in this article suggests that appeals to flight shame might not be very effective in changing people's attitudes and behaviours. The resentful sanctions of these appeals suggest that shame is not considered an acceptable emotion in the public sphere (Villadsen, 2019) and that appeals to flight shame may increase polarization in the already polarized climate change debate (Mkono et al., 2020; see also Markowitz & Guckian, 2018; McNeeley & Huntington, 2007; Regan, 2007).

At the same time, the rhetorical effect and deliberative quality of utterances are never limited to the concrete situation in which these words are uttered and responded to. Although polarised, the expressions and rejections of flight shame partake in a rhetorical exchange that may leave traces over time and affect how audiences of these mediated debates consider the issue discussed (Kjeldsen, 2016, pp. 6–7; 9; see also Kjeldsen, 2020).

Although many of the arguments through which the appeal to flight shame is rejected are based on misconceptions about the aviation industry's environmental impact (Gössling & Peeters, 2007), the rhetorical treatment of the issue through deliberative argumentation also contributes to an examination of disagreements about who should do what to tackle the challenges of climate change. Thereby, the debate contributes to shedding light on the arguments in the issue and invites the audience to (re)consider the issue in light of these (new) arguments.

While the rhetorical treatment of the issue through an epideictic rhetoric of blame may increase polarization of the issue, this treatment may also serve as an examination and negotiation of the issue and the community's norms, inviting audiences to reconsider these and bring about change (Sheard, 1996). In contrast to rejections of flight shame, where the audience is invited to condemn the identity and motives of the shamers, appeals to flight shame condemn flying as a social practice, thereby inviting the audience to reconsider this social practice in relation to the issue of climate change.

The rhetorical exchange analysed in this article comprises a small sample of debate articles from the Norwegian mass media published over a limited period. Indeed, more research is needed to examine how the debate about flight shame has varied over time and in various cultural contexts. While the neologism *flight shame* is currently not much debated in Norwegian mass media, the issue it addresses remains highly relevant as the need to reduce GHG emissions from air traffic becomes increasingly urgent. Thus, it is unlikely that the discussion has been decided and finished once and for all.

Note

1. An overview of all the articles examined can be found in the [Appendix](#). All quotes are translated by the author of the paper.

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Appendix	Date	Publication	Author	Title	Admitting shame		Inflicting shame		Rejecting shame	
					Individual	Collective	Individual	Collective	Feeling	Appeal
1	2019a-04-27	Finansavisen	Trygve Hegnar	Flammen [The flight shame]					1	1
2	2019a-04-28	VG	Eivind Traedal	Selvølgelig skal vi føle flyskam! [Of course we should feel flight shame!]			1			
3	2019a-05-02	Nordlys	Tone Angell Jensen	Nei, vi skal slett ikke skamme oss! [No, we should absolutely not be ashamed!]						1
4	2019b-05-02	Nordlys	Eivind Traedal	Neida, nordlendinger bør ikke skamme seg [No indeed, Northern-Norwegians should not be ashamed]			1			
5	2019-05-02	Nordlys	Arne Holm	KORT SAGT: Naturvernforbundet [IN SHORT: Friends of the Earth]						1
6	2019-05-06	Nordlys	Anne Grenersen	I stedet for å påføre folk skam bør seriøse politikere konsentrere seg om å få transportbransjen opp av grøfta [Instead of shaming people, serious politicians should concentrate on getting the transport industry out of the ditch]						1
7	2019b-05-31	Finansavisen	Trygve Hegnar	Brer flyskammen seg? [Is the flight shame spreading?]					1	1
8	2019b-07-03	Nordlys	Tone Angell Jensen	Vår tids dommedagsprofeter [The doomsday prophets of our time]						1
9	2019-07-03	VG	Bård Larsen	Bør vi føle flyskam? [Should we feel flight shame?]					1	1
10	2019-07-08	VG	Hermann Køhn Saether	Kom igjen Erna Solberg, flyskam handler om å bry seg [Come on, Erna Solberg, flight shame is about caring]		1				
11	2019-07-05	VG	Arild Hermstad	Sats på nattoget, Erna! Ikke flyet! [Go in for the night train, Erna! Not the aeroplane!]			1			

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Appendix Continued.

Date	Publication	Author	Title	Admitting shame		Inflicting shame		Rejecting shame	
				Individual	Collective	Individual	Collective	Feeling	Appeal
12	2019-07-10	Dagsavisen	Kent Gudmundsen	Ingen bør føle skam [No one should be ashamed]					1
13	2019-07-11	VG	Astrid Meland	At jeg ikke skjermes! [I am not ashamed!]				1	1
14	2019-07-12	Dagsavisen	Petter Levin	Dugnadssånd er ikke nok [A positive attitude to voluntary communal work does not suffice]	1				
15	2019-07-12	Nordlys	Johannes Hansen	KORT SAGT: Flyskam er Fy-skam [IN SHORT: Flight shame, fie I say]				1	
16	2019-07-16	VG	Sanna Sarromaa	Skam er en hersketeknikk og et maktmiddel [Shame is a domination technique and an instrument of power]				1	1
17	2019-07-16	Dagsavisen	Harald Fleischer	Ingenting å skamme seg over [Nothing to be ashamed of]	1		1		
18	2019-07-18	VG	Caroline Hager	Normendring, ikke hersketeknikk [Change of norms, not domination technique]			1		
19	2019c-07-19	Finansavisen	Trygve Hegnar	Ny pris kontroll [New price control]				1	
20	2019-07-20	Nordlys	Sissel Wessel-Hansen	I skammekroken med hele gjengen [To the doghouse with us all]					1
21	2019-08-03	Dagsavisen	Lars West Johnsen	En annen verden [A different world]					1
22	2019-08-07	Dagsavisen	Petter Fergestad	Synd og skam [Sin and shame]					1
23	2019-08-08	Dagsavisen	Nora Saelnes	Tom retorikk [Empty rhetorics]					1

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Appendix Continued.

Date	Publication	Author	Title	Admitting shame		Inflicting shame		Rejecting shame		
				Individual	Collective	Individual	Collective	Feeling	Appeal	
24	2019d-08-12	Finansavisen	Trygve Hegnar	Flyfritt 2020 [Flight free 2020]					1	
25	2020-08-14	Dagsavisen	Magnus Forsberg	Skammens teater [The theater of shame]	1		1			
26	2019-08-19	Nordlys	Anja Bakken Riise	Bør nordlendinger føle flyskam? [Should Northern-Norwegians feel flight shame?]			1			
27	2019-08-21	Nordlys	Einar Giaever	KORT SAGT: Mätte være en spøk [IN SHORT: Had to be a joke]						1
28	2019-08-22	Dagsavisen	Petter Gulli	Skammen min er selvpåført [My shame is self-inflicted]	1					
29	2019-08-23	Dagsavisen	Mona Sprenger & Aina Næsmoen	De unge hylles, men hva gjør vi? [We praise the young but what are we doing?]					1	
30	2019-08-29	VG	Tina Bru	Det må lønne seg å velge miljøvennlig [It must pay to choose environmentally friendly]						1
31	2019-08-29	Nordlys	Beathe Hoel	Forbruke stadig mer, misbruke naturen, utrydde arter og drepe biotoper? [Consume more and more, abuse nature, exterminate species, and kill biotopes?]				1		
32	2019-08-31	VG	Markus Refsdal	Til sauene: Velg en god gjeter! [To all sheep: Pick a good shepherd!]			1			
33	2019e-09-03	Finansavisen	Trygve Hegnar	Brølet [The roar]						1
34	2019-09-08	VG	Børge A. Roum	Flyskam? Nei, skjerp deg! [Flight shame? No, pull yourself together!]				1		
35	2019-09-20	Dagsavisen	Kari Elisabeth Svare	Skammens tid [The time of shame]						1

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Appendix Continued.

Date	Publication	Author	Title	Admitting shame		Inflicting shame		Rejecting shame		
				Individual	Collective	Individual	Collective	Feeling	Appeal	
36	2019-09-24	Nordlys	Berit Skorstad	Flyskam - grønn av skam [Flight shame - green with shame]					1	
37	2019-11-13	VG	Ola Hammer Langleite	Ja til flyskam og klimaskremsler! [Yes to flight shame and climate scares!]		1				
38	2020-01-10	Dagsavisen	Anne Storberget	Miljøskam er en digresjon [Environmental shame is a digression]		1				
39	2020-03-04	VG	Stian A. Lothe	Ta folks engasjement på alvor [Take people's engagement seriously]					1	
40	2020-04-01	Dagsavisen	Hanne Mauno	Ord i 2020 [Words of 2020]	2	6	1	13	9	21