



Cars as a status symbol: Youth attitudes toward sustainable transport in a post-socialist city

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 April 2017

Received in revised form 8 December 2017

Accepted 5 June 2018

Keywords:

Mobility intentions

Adolescents

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

Tirana, Albania

Sustainable transport

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the mobility intentions of adolescents in Tirana, Albania – one of the least studied areas of Central and Eastern Europe. The main research question – explored through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) – is whether now, nearly three decades after the demise of state socialism, cars are still considered as a necessity and/or a status symbol among adolescents. This group never experienced socialism and its extreme restrictions on car ownership and use. Although Tirana is a very compact city with work, services, and social contacts typically within walking distance, the findings indicate that most adolescents in Tirana, including those who do not particularly like cars and driving, intend to purchase cars and drive in the future. Cars remain a strong status symbol. This does not bode well for transport sustainability. If unchecked, adolescents' intentions might directly translate into car-dependent travel behavior in the future.

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1. Introduction

In Western contexts, there is evidence that Millennials (the generation born after 1980), especially men, are less interested in owning and driving cars than their parents, and more attracted to alternative modes of transport (Kuhnimhof et al., 2012). However, the opposite seems to be true in parts on Central and Eastern Europe. Here, after the demise of socialism in 1990, private car ownership and use increased sharply (Pucher and Buehler, 2005). Cars were purchased not only to fulfill mobility needs but also to signify freedom and a higher socio-economic status in the new, market-driven, competitive milieu (Pucher and Buehler, 2005; Stead and Pojani, 2017).

Now, nearly three decades on, are cars still considered as a necessity and/or a status symbol in the region? In particular, are youth, who never experienced socialism and its extreme restrictions on car ownership and use, as car-oriented as earlier cohorts? Are environmental and mobility attitudes and beliefs among Eastern European youth converging with the attitudes and beliefs of their Western counterparts? Or are they still shaped by the socialist and post-socialist legacy of the region? The foregoing questions prompted this research study.

The way in which pro-environmental behavior in adolescents is established is particularly important in terms of sustainability outcomes because the origins of behavioral beliefs are in childhood (UN 1992). This article discusses the mobility aspirations of university students in Tirana, Albania – one of the least studied areas of Central and Eastern Europe.

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This is an interesting case because car ownership and use was entirely prohibited until 1990s. Now, Tirana is very compact with work, services, and social contacts typically within walking distance, but it is also flooded with car traffic.

The first part of the article presents the conceptual framework, which guided the study design and analysis. This conceptual framework is loosely based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The case study context is described next. The third part of the article provides an overview of the data collected for this study (374 surveys of first-year university students) and the method of analysis (Structural Equation Modeling). The reminder of the article deals with the findings and policy implications.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Theory of planned behavior

The authors' understanding of the role of motivation or intention in predicting behavior derives from the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB, Fig. 1), a well-tested theoretical model developed by Ajzen (1991). According to this theory, the likelihood of a particular behavior being performed in specific contexts (e.g., commuting by a certain travel mode) is highly dependent on an individual's intention to perform the behavior. In this study, the authors focus specifically on intentions rather than the behavior that results from those intentions (or motivations). In turn, the intention to perform a behavior can be accurately predicted by three independent concepts: (a) beliefs about the likely consequences of the behavior (behavioral beliefs), (b) beliefs about the expectations of others (normative beliefs), and (c) beliefs about the presence of factors that may further or hinder the performance of the behavior (control beliefs). As a general rule, the stronger the intention to engage in a behavior, the more likely is its performance. Therefore, to predict future travel patterns and behaviors correctly, it is important to understand the travel intentions of youth. But the behavior is only performed if an individual has actual control over the behavior in addition to having the right motivation or intention. Actual control depends on an individual's ability to decide at will whether to perform or not the behavior and on his/her opportunity and resources – such as, money, skills, and cooperation of others (Ajzen, 1991).

Clearly, the TPB views human behavior as reasoned – although people's beliefs might be unfounded or biased. However, habits, moral principles, personal norms, self-identity, and lifestyles are also likely to be a motivation for humans to perform certain behaviors (Aarts, Verplanken, & van Knippenberg, 1998; Hunecke, Blöbaum, Matthies, & Höger, 2001). Habits, in particular, may play an important role during routinized, semi-automatic actions, such as the travel mode choice for the daily commute (Aarts et al., 1998; de Bruijn, Kremers, Singh, van den Putte, & van Mechelen, 2009). If habits are strong,

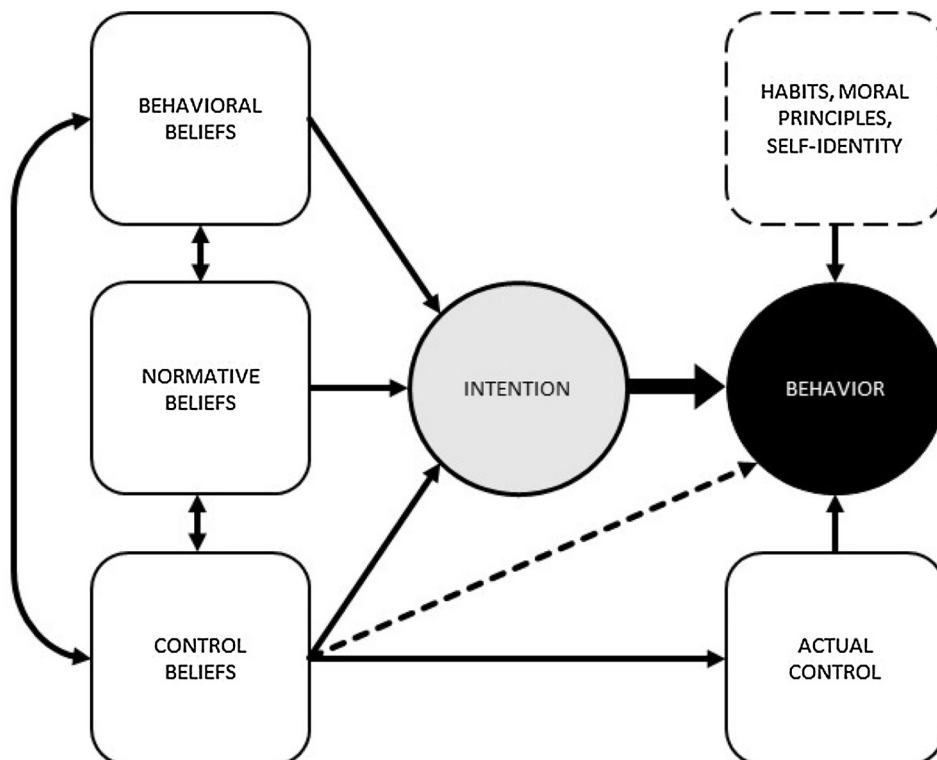


Fig. 1. Theory of planned behavior, and the interplay with habits, personal norms, moral principles, and self-identity (based on Ajzen 1991).

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