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National park visitors' car-use intention: A norm-neutralization model

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ABSTRACT

Reducing private car use is an efficient way to promote the sustainable development of national parks. However, many visitors persist in using their cars, even when they are aware of the environmental damage it causes. This study proposed a norm-neutralization model to investigate why national park visitors persist in car-based trips by partially integrating the theory of planned behavior, the norm-activation model, and neutralization theory. The results indicated that neutralization techniques can effectively reduce the effects of social norms and attitudes on car-based trip intention in a conflicting-norm context. The strongest predictors of behavior intention were attitudes toward the behavior while neutralization techniques were the second strongest. The effect of pro-driving norms showed a significant reduction when neutralization techniques were added, but pro-environmental norms did not have a significant effect on behavior intention. Practical and theoretical implications, as well as directions for future research, are discussed.

1. Introduction

Increased disposable income has boosted the growth of private car ownership and car-based trips in developing countries. By March 2017, the number of private cars in China had risen to over 150 million (China Transport Administration of Public Security Ministry, 2017). The car is becoming the main travel mode among Chinese for short-haul holiday trips. According to a report by the China Tourism Academy, there were 32.13 million car-based tourists during the eight-day super holiday for the 2017 National Day and Mid-Autumn Festival (China Tourism Academy, 2017). Private cars provide many benefits for travelers, including benefits that are functional (e.g., convenient), psychological (e.g., pleasurable), and social (e.g., self-image boosting) (Ellaway, Macintyre, Hiscock, & Kearns, 2003; Uba & Chatzidakis, 2016), thus promoting the formation of pro-driving norms.

However, private car use is also a major contributor to overall carbon emissions from the transport sector (Klockner & Friedrichsmeier, 2011). Transportation dominates the energy bills of domestic and international tourists, accounting for 65–73% of total energy use (Becken, Simmons, & Frampton, 2003; Filimonau, Dickinson, & Robbins, 2014; Lin, 2010; Martín-Cejas, 2015). Aside from carbon emissions and energy use, car-based trips create many other environmental problems, especially in natural areas, such as negative effects on wild animals and plants, noise, and crowding (Beunen, Regnerus, & Jaarsma, 2008; Gao, Huang, & Zhang, 2017; Wolf & Croft, 2010). During each Golden Week in China, it is common for the large number of private cars to cause traffic jams and pollution on highways and in tourism areas. Such consequences have aroused public environmental awareness. Rapidly developing high-speed railways are providing alternatives for short- and medium-length travel. In tourism areas, tourists can choose more sustainable travel modes, such as public buses, shared bicycles, and electric vehicles (Nakamura & Abe, 2016). Nevertheless, it remains difficult to change or reduce car use among tourists (Davies & Weston, 2015).

The decision to use a car depends on various factors. Existing research has explored car-use behavior in daily life, revealing a complex range of reasons, including those that are instrumental or utilitarian, psychosocial, affective, or situational (Bamberg, Fujii, Friman, & Garling, 2011; Mackett, 2003; Uba & Chatzidakis, 2016). Worldwide, the private car is the major travel and recreational mode for national park visitors (Connell & Page, 2008). While some studies have investigated the ecological implications of bus transit services provided by national parks (Mace, Marquit, & Bates, 2013; Monz, D'Antonio, Lawson, Barber, & Newman, 2016), few studies have examined why national park visitors persist in using cars. Therefore, the present study aimed to develop a norm-neutralization model to address that question and show the relative importance of different determinants or antecedents. This model partially integrates the theory of planned behavior

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(TPB), the norm-activation model (NAM), and neutralization theory. It proposes that social norms (including pro-driving and pro-environmental norms) are determinants of car-based-trip intention. Here, pro-driving norms are impetus factors while pro-environmental norms are hindering factors. Positive attitudes toward car-based trips are important contributors to car-use intention. The perceived benefits of car use promote the formation of pro-driving norms and positive attitudes toward car-based trips. Meanwhile, the perceived negative effects of car use activate pro-environmental norms and inhibit positive attitudes toward car-based trips. Various neutralization techniques (e.g., denial of responsibility) are used to reduce the cognitive dissonance caused by different kinds of norms and justify car-use behaviors. For this study, this model was tested using a pilot national park in China.

It should be noted that the model does not include perceived behavioral control and ascription of responsibility, as in TPB and NAM. There are two reasons for this. First, this study aimed to propose a norm-neutralization model that emphasizes the effects of two conflicting norms and neutralization techniques on behavior intention; it did not seek to test a fully integrated TPB and NAM model. Second, this study viewed the perceived benefits and perceived negative influences of car use as two opposite effects that promote or activate pro-driving norms and pro-environmental norms, respectively. Prior research has also suggested a parallel model for NAM that assumes that awareness of consequences has a direct effect on personal norms (Harland, Staats, & Wilke, 2007; Zhang, Geng, & Sun, 2017). Accordingly, the present study assumed that the perceived negative influences of car use had a direct effect on pro-environmental norms.

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature on car use and pro-environmental behavior. First, in the field of tourism and national park research, this study is the first attempt to focus on a conflicting-norm context by integrating pro-driving and pro-environmental norms into one model. Prior pro-environmental behavior models have viewed social norms as important antecedents of behavior intentions; both subjective norms and personal norms are pro-environmental norms in nature. In some contexts, however, tourists likely face conflicting norms simultaneously, as with pro-driving norms. Therefore, this study extends previous research from focusing on only a single type of norm (e.g., pro-environmental norms) to focusing on pro-environmental norms as well as other conflicting norms, such as pro-driving norms. This logic can be extended to other contexts beyond car use. Second, this is the first attempt to integrate neutralization theory into a pro-environmental behavior model, which is helpful for explaining how tourists justify their norm-violating behaviors. This study compared a model that included neutralization techniques with one that did not include neutralization techniques; in this way, the role of neutralization techniques was demonstrated. Third, this study explored the role of the perceived personal benefits and perceived environmental costs of car-based trips in the formation of pro-driving norms, pro-environmental norms, and attitudes toward behaviors; this is helpful for understanding the formation processes of norms and attitudes. Lastly, based on prior qualitative and quantitative research in other fields, this study developed a perceived benefit scale, pro-driving norms scale, and neutralization techniques scale that can be used in future pro-environmental behavior research.

2. Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

2.1. Social norms and pro-environmental behavior

The social norm is an important concept that originated in sociology. Over time, it has been used to explain a wide range of behaviors, including pro-environmental behavior and travel behavior (Donald, Cooper, & Conchie, 2014; Riggs, 2017). Most studies distinguish descriptive norms from injunctive norms (Farrow, Grolleau, & Ibanez, 2017). Descriptive norms refer to perceptions of “normal” behavior, or what most people do, whereas injunctive norms refer to what most people approve or disapprove of doing (i.e., pre- or proscriptive norms). Thøgersen (2006) proposed a norm taxonomy according to the level of norm internalization, including descriptive norms, subjective social norms, introjected norms, and integrated norms. The latter three norms are assigned to injunctive norms. Subjective social norms describe what other people think a person should do. This category of norm is included in the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). As internalization levels increase, social norms manifest as personal norms, including introjected and integrated personal norms. An integrated personal norm is one that is deeply internalized in an individual's values and beliefs whereas an introjected norm is superficially internalized. Conforming to or violating introjected norms will cause self-imposed feelings of pride or guilt. Personal norms have been included in the NAM (Schwartz, 1977) and the value-belief-norm theory (VBN, Stern, 2000).

TPB, NAM, and VBN have been widely used to explain a variety of pro-environmental behaviors in tourism and hospitality studies. In those models, norms and attitudes are two important antecedents of pro-environmental behavior. Subjective norms and personal norms are often included simultaneously in many integrated models. The former is operationalized as perceptions of the influence of important others—namely, whether important others think one should perform a particular behavior (e.g., stay at a green hotel when traveling) or a general pro-environmental behavior (Goh, Ritchie, & Wang, 2017; Han, 2015). The latter is operationalized as a sense of obligation to perform pro-environmental actions (e.g., select an eco-friendly restaurant) (Gao et al., 2017; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017; Kim, Njite, & Hancera, 2013). While these two kinds of norms have been shown to have significant effects on pro-environmental behaviors, their direct-effect sizes are different (Table 1). A number of studies by Han and his colleagues have shown that personal norms have a stronger effect on pro-environmental behaviors than subjective norms (Han, 2014, 2015; Han, Jae, & Hwang, 2016; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017). Those findings corroborate an earlier study on the use of public transportation (Bamberg, Hunecke, & Blobaum, 2007). However, researchers have argued that subjective norms contribute to the formation of personal norms and have indirect effects on pro-environmental behaviors through personal norms and attitudes (Bamberg et al., 2007; Han, 2015; Han et al., 2016; Kim, Ham, Yang, & Choi, 2013).

2.2. Pro-driving norms, pro-environmental norms, and attitudes

In addition to Thøgersen's (2006) taxonomic approach from an internalization perspective, different norms exist in different life domains or subculture groups. Sometimes, these norms are opposing or conflicting. For example, pro-driving and pro-environmental norms are two distinct and opposing sets of normative expectations that may influence car usage. In a study of university students' commuting behaviors, Uba and Chatzidakis (2016) suggested that pro-driving norms applied only to driving traditional cars, not sustainable cars (e.g., electronic cars). They argued that pro-driving norms were more prevalent among young adults as they came of age. In this context, car use is viewed as a symbolic tool for managing self-impressions, socialization, and identity building. Under the pressure of pro-driving norms, students may persist in car-use behavior, even if they are aware of the environmental damage caused by cars. Moreover, in developing countries, private car ownership is viewed as a symbol of status and prestige. In that context, car-based trips have been encouraged and advocated by most tourism destinations, local governments, and related industries. In China, the private car seems to have become the preferred travel mode for tourists. Aside from social benefits, such as status and prestige, psychological (e.g., the pleasure of driving) and utilitarian (e.g., convenience) benefits also facilitate the formation of pro-driving norms for Chinese tourists. To our knowledge, no previous study has provided an explicit definition of pro-driving norms or developed a scale to measure them. Following Thøgersen's (2006) taxonomy, this study views pro-driving norms as descriptive norms and defines them as one's perception that most other