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Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to Understand Traveler Behavior Affected by COVID-19: A Qualitative Study

Xiaoxu Wang
Texas A & M University - College Station

Jim Petrick
Texas A & M University - College Station

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Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the world and has had a devastating impact on the tourism industry (Wang et al., 2022). Research has suggested that traveler behaviors significantly changed during the pandemic (Li et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2021).   In an attempt to better understand changes in traveler behavior, this study is grounded in the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and Plog's psychocentric travel model, and examines the ways travelers have negotiated their constraints to travel prior to, during, and after the pandemic to aid in understanding traveler behaviors.

Further, while much research has been conducted related to COVID-19's impact on travel, little research has examined the underlying determinants of changes in behavior, and whether these changes will continue over time. Since this knowledge is likely important to the field, yet unexplored, the study will also use qualitative methods in hopes of providing a richer understanding of the phenomena.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to a) understand the underlying reasons for traveler behavior changes from pre-COVID to during COVID, to present, and b) understand how these changes and impacts will affect travel behaviors in the future.

Literature Review

Traveler Behavior Affected by COVID-19

COVID-19 has affected traveler behavior in various aspects (Wang et al., 2022). Due to stay-at-home orders and travel ban/restrictions, both long-distance travel and indoor leisure activities decreased significantly in the early stages of the pandemic, with many tourists switching to outdoor recreation (Aloi et al., 2020; Falchetta & Noussan, 2020), and tending to take private transportation to avoid being infected with the virus (Aloi et al., 2020).

Shifts in traveler behavior were also found after the first stage of the pandemic outbreak (Marques et al., 2022). Wang et al. (2022) found that as restraining orders were lifted, visits to leisure and entertainment venues such as restaurants and bars as well as domestic destinations immediately increased. Therefore, this study considers it worthwhile to understand the behavior of travelers prior to, during and after the pandemic.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Ajzen (1985) developed the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as an extension of the theory of reasoned action, and it is arguably the most widely researched theory for understanding individual behaviors (Fielding et al., 2008). The theory indicates that if people believe a behavior will lead to a specific outcome or benefit, their significant referents recognize this, and they have the ability to achieve it, then people tend to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Based on self-interest motives, the TPB explains travelers' decision-making via an understanding of their attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavior control (Ajzen, 1985; Hsu & Huang, 2012).

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Attitudes have been defined as positive or negative evaluations of behavior and to have a volitional impact on an individual's behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). In tourism research, attitudes have been interpreted as tourists' tendencies or feelings toward the trip, destination, or service (Hsu & Huang, 2012). Social norms have been defined as the perceived social pressure to participate in a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which indicate that an individual's intention can be influenced by an individual's significant others' attitudes and evaluations (Ajzen, 2020). Perceived behavioral control, a non-volitional predictor of behavioral intentions, has been defined as an individual's belief in the degree of difficulty in achieving a behavior (Ajzen, 1985).

The TPB has been commonly applied to explain traveler behaviors and has been extended with the addition of multiple different variables. These variables include: motivations, electronic word of mouth, and destination familiarity (Hsu & Huang, 2012; Soliman, 2021). Researchers have also used the TPB to understand traveler behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic and have found that the effect of social norms on travel intentions were stronger during the travel ban period, but attitudes and PBC were better predictors after travel restrictions were lifted (Liu et al., 2021; Rahmafitria et al., 2021). Due to its ability to explain multiple types of behaviors, including those during the pandemic, the TPB will be used to theoretically ground the current study.

Plog's Model

Plog's (1974) psychographic travel model places travelers' personalities on a continuum from psychocentric to allocentric. He defined psychocentrics as people who are self-inhibited and non-adventuresome, and allocentrics as people with more self-confidence and who are more likely to seek risk (Plog, 1974).

In a crisis-related tourism study, Plog (2006) found that allocentrics were more likely to travel for adventure and risk after SARS. Similarly, Litvin et al. (2022) collected data in the early stages of COVID-19 and found that psychocentrics were less likely to travel during that period. Further, Morar et al. (2021) found that personality affected individuals' travel behavior during COVID-19, as individuals with fun-seeking personalities tended not to avoid traveling after the pandemic outbreak. Since Plog's (1974) model has been found to help understand behaviors during crises, it will also be used to guide the current study.

Constraints Negotiation

Constraints have been defined as factors that prevent people from participating in leisure activities, and can be divided into three types: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural (Jackson, 1988; Crawford et al., 1991). While constraints have historically been studied to understand non-participation, Jackson et al. (1993) found that the relationship between constraints and participation could be positive in some cases. The construct of constraint negotiation suggests that travelers have the ability to overcome constraints and still participate if they are motivated to do so (Scott, 1991; Son et al., 2008; White, 2008). Hence, this study aimed to also understand travelers' perceived constraints as well as their negotiation process as they relate to travel before, during and after COVID-19.

Methods

Participants

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Participants were recruited in the late Fall of 2022 via a convenience sample in the state of Texas. Participants voluntarily joined the study and were informed of the purpose of the study as a study of 'travel behavior before, during and after COVID-19'. Saturation occurred after the 16th in-depth interview, and an additional five interviews were conducted in order to confirm saturation. The heterogeneous sample (n = 21) contained 52% females, whose average age was 29.

Procedure

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022) defined travel as a phenomena which occurs outside one's usual environment, where they stay for a minimum of 24 hours. This study focused on leisure travel and did not include business travel or commuting.

The initial script was developed based on the TPB, Plog's (1974) model, and constraints negotiation, using pre-COVID, during COVID the present and future scenarios for respondents to respond to. The initial script was slightly modified based on 1 test interview, and probing questions were used throughout to provide increased clarity of responses.

The finalized interview structure started with a question that measured the participant's propensity to being psychocentric or allocentric. The rest of the questions were divided into four major sections, corresponding to four different periods: before COVID-19 (before the year 2020), the first year of COVID-19 (the year 2020), present (from 2021 to 2022), and future (after the epidemic end).

The questions in each section addressed the TPB and Constraints Negotiation of each of the four periods. Participants were guided to answer the questions regarding attitudes, social norms, PBC, perceived constraints, and how they negotiated the constraints. Researchers asked follow-up questions based on the participants' responses to better understand their thoughts.

Preliminary Results

Findings from a preliminary analysis of interviews are presented in this abstract. Further analysis is underway and will be presented at TTRA.

Attitudes

Before the pandemic occurred, a large number of participants had positive attitudes towards travel, but only one respondent believed their attitudes could determine 100% of their travel decisions.

In the first year of COVID, some individuals' attitudes were the same as before COVID-19, still positive, but the impact of COVID prevented them from traveling. The COVID impact mainly stemmed from health concerns and travel ban/restrictions. Others' attitude towards travel turned negative because of the concerns about their health. For example, "I didn't even consider traveling at that time (the first year of COVID) because I thought it was dangerous and I wouldn't even go to the grocery store, instead I used delivery (respondent 02)."

For those whose attitudes toward travel became negative during COVID, their current attitudes have become more positive, and some have even returned to the level they were at before COVID occurred. There were many reasons for the change in attitude, including: "I got vaccinated so I'm not as worried about getting sick;" "the death rate from COVID is way down,

and a lot of people around me have tested positive and they were not life-threatening;" and "People around me are starting to stop wearing masks, and it seems (COVID-19) is not that many dangers".

For the future, some participants said that the uncertainty that they felt during COVID will continue to influence their traveling: "I will make travel plans with more consideration of whether the sites are open and will try to get a fuller picture of the destination, rather than just making a simple plan and leaving as I did before (COVID-19). "

Social Norms

Lots of participants reported that friends and family influenced their travel decisions, including the decision to travel or not, destination choice, and travel time and duration. Those impacts were found to occur across all four periods.

During the first year of COVID-19, some participants mentioned that family and friends' concerns about COVID-19 made them decide to travel less or not to travel at all. On the contrary, a small number of participants believed that their thoughts were most important, and this group of participants showed a high allocentric tendency.

Regarding the current increase in the number of trips compared to the first year of COVID, some participants thought this change was due to people around them (friends, family, co-workers) being less afraid of COVID-19, thus they believed that it was safe to travel.

For the future, a lot of female respondents (n =7) believed that children may become the biggest influencer that limits their travel or influence their destinations. Other respondents also thought that family's effect will become larger once they get married and friends' effect will become less important than now.

Perceived Behavior Control & Perceived Constraints

Before COVID occurred, some participants felt they had more than 60%, but not more than 90%, control over their travels, and only one participant felt she had 100% control over their travels. Time and money were commonly considered as constraints. Other constraints included weather, security, visas, etc.

In the first year of COVID, some participants' control over their travel decreased significantly. The stay-at-home orders and travel ban/restrictions were considered as the biggest constraints. Uncertainty was another constraint, including the possibility of temporary cancellations of airline tickets, and inaccessibility of tourism attractions without reservations. Conversely, a few participants indicated that working from home had a diminished impact of time as a constraint during that period. Additionally, since flight ticket prices and gasoline prices were low, it alleviated budget constraints and therefore a few respondents did to travel more than before COVID.

From 2021 to the present, participants generally reported that the restrictions imposed by COVID gradually decreased. Thus, for many, their control over travel has returned to pre-COVID levels. Additionally, some participants mentioned that the factors limiting their travel had changed due to entering a different life stage (graduation, marriage, etc.). One male participant mentioned that finances became less restrictive for him year by year because his salary was increasing every year.

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For the future, most participants agreed that their control over traveling would be more than 50%. In terms of factors that may prevent them from traveling, time and money were expected to limit their travel. Additionally, health conditions were believed to potentially be future constraints.

Constraints Negotiation

Before COVID occurred, lots of participants were able to negotiate time and money constraints by "adjusting departure times to fit my work schedule", "shortening the length of stay", and "choosing a relatively cheap flight time, like early in the morning". However, some participants were not able to negotiate those constraints. One male participant said, "My work was the first priority and I would only consider traveling when I didn't need to work."

During 2020, many participants were unable to negotiate the constraints related to COVID-19. "My concerns about getting sick (COVID) outweighed my desire to get out and travel,"; "At that time COVID had a high mortality rate and I didn't want to risk it."

However there were also examples of successful participant negotiations that occurred in the latter portion of 2020. "Things got better after June (of 2020), and some of my friends started going to parks and outdoor places, so I thought (traveling) wasn't that much dangerous." Additionally, other participants mentioned that they changed the way they traveled. "I used to travel by plane (before COVID-19), but that was not safe during the pandemic, so I chose a road trip".

In the last two years, participants who still considered COVID to be a constraint had negotiated their way to continue their travels: "I wore a mask and brought more alcohol wipes"; "I avoided places with a lot of people, for both restaurants and attractions.

For the future, lots of participants believed they would have more confidence to negotiate the constraint of money. Regarding health and fatigue constraints, one male participant said "it depends on how tired I am, if I am not that tired, I think a vacation might be a chance to recharge, but if I have a health problem, then I will not decide to travel."

Conclusion & Implications

This study was guided by the TPB to better understand how and why tourist behaviors have changed during the pandemic in terms of attitudes, social norms, and PBC, and whether they were able to negotiate constraints.

According to the preliminary results, some participants reduced the number of trips they took during the first year of the pandemic, since concerns about the health problems associated with COVID-19 influenced their' attitudes. Negative perceptions that their family and friends hold towards travel during the pandemic also reduced participants' willingness to travel.

Additionally, participants reduced the number of trips due to stay-at-home orders and travel ban/restrictions that negatively affected participants' PBC. However, some participants negotiated the constraints related to COVID-19 by taking more precautions such as wearing masks, washing hands more often, and maintaining social distancing.

It was also found that some travelers who were not afraid of COVID-19 increased the number of trips they took because of lower flight tickets, hotel, and gas prices during the

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pandemic. Some of the participants also took more trips, since they were working remotely during the pandemic, which resulted in freedom of time.

Results further revealed that participants expect to specify detailed travel plans to avoid the uncertainty that they perceived during the COVID. Lots of respondents expect to travel more in the future due to their confidence in negotiating the constraint of money. However, some respondents believed their family and children will limit their traveling.

Theoretical Implications

This study found that positive attitudes toward travel was positively related to whether they could negotiate their constraints. Hence, a positive attitude in the face of health concerns such as COVID-19 can help travelers to be more active in finding ways to negotiate, and suggests constraints negotiation as a potential important extension of the TPB.

In addition, the personal attitudes of more allocentric participants was found to play a greater role in decision-making than the attitudes of others (social norms) during all four phases. This suggests that the use of Plog's (1974) model as a moderator within the TPB may help understand differences in traveler behaviors. Further analysis is needed to better understand this finding.

Further, attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioral control were all found to help explain traveler behaviors, in all four examined time frames. Yet, differences related to how each of the expected antecedents have an effect on intended and actual behaviors suggest that the pandemic has changed, and will continue to change tourists' behaviors.

Practical Implications

This study found that some respondents are very price sensitive. Therefore, the tourism industry could try to lower prices to attract price-sensitive tourists in the post-pandemic or lower seasons. Additionally, respondents were more likely to show a willingness to travel when they perceive health risks to be low, so the sterilization of airplanes and hotels is likely to be important. Therefore, disinfection and staff health management need to be highlighted.

Furthermore, attitudes were found to affect both travel intentions and the ability to negotiate constraints, highlighting the importance of monitoring visitor attitudes. Results also suggest it is important to understand travelers' interests, especially for allocentrics, since they were found to focus more on the uniqueness of the destination. PBC was also found to have impacts on traveler behaviors, thus developing strategies to reduce the perception of behavioral control can be important. Finally, some flexible policies should likely be adopted to address the time constraints faced by travelers. Examples include flexible airline ticket changes or refunds, free hotel cancellations, etc.

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