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Research Note

Biting the travel bullet: A motivated reasoning perspective on traveling during a pandemic

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Background

Although airlines estimate a $113 billion loss from travel cancellations due to COVID-19 (IATA, 2020), recent reports suggest that not all tourists’ travel plans were equally affected. An Indonesian market survey in February 2020 indicated that as many as 77% of travelers were not planning to cancel their holiday (JakPat, 2020), despite the country having the highest number of cases in Southeast Asia. The urgency and scale of the pandemic suggest that neither naivety nor ignorance can adequately explain this phenomenon. Thrill-seeking tourists sometimes seek out risks, but the pandemic seems an unlikely source of adrenaline. A significant gap therefore exists where literature cannot fully explain the counterintuitive behaviors of these seemingly “crisis-resistant” tourists (Hajibaba, Gretzel, Leisch, & Dolnicar, 2015).

This research note reports the results of two studies and uses the theoretical lens of motivated reasoning, i.e. “wishful thinking bias” (Kunda, 1990) to unpack tourists’ travel motivations during a pandemic. We found that Indonesians’ travel plans during the pandemic were largely related to the Eid al-Fitr period, typically considered as the most important holiday season in Indonesia. However, celebrations were banned for 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Al-Jazeera, 2020), thus situating them as “guilty pleasures” where tension exists between the desire for indulgence and beliefs about self-control (Miao, 2010). The first study was conducted in mid-February 2020 to probe the antecedents of travel intentions before Eid. The second study was conducted in late-May 2020 after Eid to further explicate the motivations of those who have indulged in celebrations despite the ban. Together, both studies provide important answers to understand tourist behaviors during a crisis that applies beyond the context of the current pandemic. Specifically, the study highlights the importance of tourists’ personal agency (or lack thereof) as drivers of risky behavior, which are often taken for granted (Armitage & Christian, 2003).

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Theoretical framework

The theory of reasoned action has been criticized for over-emphasizing rational, volitional control as the driver of behavior (Armitage & Christian, 2003). In contrast, the theory of planned behavior acknowledges the significance of perceived behavioral control (PBC) to better explain how individuals may behave irrationally (Ajzen, 2002). For instance, while the dangers of alcohol are well-understood, a variety of psychological and social factors may result in low PBC and subsequently decreases the ability to resist drinking (Kidwell & Jewell, 2003). Relatedly, the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) further explains that when individuals perceive low PBC towards a behavior that goes against one's base desires (e.g. resisting a drink), they may discount certain factors (e.g. risks of intoxication) while overvaluing others (e.g. peer conformity) to justify indulging those basic desires. For example, Sembada and Koay (2019) reported that shoppers who could not find their desired goods offline were more likely to engage in wishful thinking by trusting unreputable online shops that supply these goods, despite understanding the risks.

Returning to the current research, we propose that the motivated reasoning perspective may also help explain travels during the pandemic. That is, some travelers may perceive low PBC to cancel their travel plans due to a confluence of a variety of factors such as religiosity (Bond, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2015) or familial obligations (Kluin & Lehto, 2012). Traditionally, trust towards a destination (DT) (Wang, Law, Hung, & Guillet, 2014) and perceived risks of traveling (PR) (Chew & Jahari, 2014) are robust, rational predictors of travel intentions (TI). However, low PBC may trigger biased reasoning that leads travelers into trusting their destination despite understanding the risks. The first study thus aims to test these relationships, as depicted in Fig. 1.

Our second study expands the research to empirically test the predictors of low PBC and examine their role in the perceived guilt of travelers who indulged in Eid celebrations, despite government restrictions. As stated, motivated reasoning posits that individuals may use a biased set of cognitive processes to resolve conflicting beliefs in favor of a self-serving resolution (Kunda, 1990). For example, Sharvit, Brambilla, Babush, and Colucci (2015) found that nationalistic individuals felt less negatively about immigrant abuse when they could reason away the mistreatment as being the result of the immigrants’ own failure to assimilate. Returning to our context, we forward that feelings of guilt over traveling despite the ban may be assuaged when travelers could attribute their decisions to external factors as justifications.

Given the religious nature and strong familial expectations associated with Eid, we focus on religiosity and familial obligations (FO) as the factors that may motivate biased reasoning to reduce their guilt over traveling. That is, individuals may rely on these two factors to reach the conclusion that they “have no choice” but to indulge in celebrations. Specifically, Study 2 tests whether high levels of religiosity and FO are indicative of low PBC, and subsequently predict low feelings of guilt (Fig. 2).

Study 1

The first study analyzed data from 206 Indonesian respondents, collected in mid-February 2020 (study details are presented in the web appendix). Harman’s single factor test found that the first component accounted for only 39% of the variance, indicating common method bias as not a threat. Respondents’ age, gender (Mage = 32.15, SD = 8.91; 47.8% male), months left before their travel (M = 2.38, SD = 0.49), and awareness of COVID-19 (M = 5.24, SD = 1.22) served as covariates.

The model in Fig. 1 was tested using PLS-SEM (nbootstrap = 5000), with results shown in Table 1. Convergent validity measures (available in the web appendix) showed all criteria were satisfied.

Results show the moderated mediation indices were significant, indicating support for the model. PR did not have a significant direct effect towards DT, and this relationship was only significant when the interaction with PBC is considered. We analyzed this interaction using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) and found that the relationship was only significant in the high PBC (+1 SD)
condition, but not in the low (−1 SD) condition. Fig. 2 illustrates that those reporting low PBC are more likely to have a higher level of trust despite perceiving high travel risk, indicating a reasoning bias.

Study 2

The second study analyzed data from 230 Indonesian respondents in late-May 2020 (details presented in web appendix). The model in Fig. 3 was tested using PLS-SEM and the results are presented in Table 2. Common method bias was again found to not be a threat (36.8% first component variance). Respondents’ age and gender (Mage = 32.16, SD = 8.90; 57% male) served as co-variates of the analysis. Like study 1, reliability, convergent and discriminant validity of the instruments were analyzed, with all criteria satisfied.

Both FO and religiosity are negatively associated with PBC. PBC itself had a positive relationship with guilt. The indirect analysis shows that PBC fully mediates the effect of religiosity, and partially mediates the relationship between FO and guilt. In other words, those highly religious and connected to their families are less likely to feel guilty indulging in forbidden Eid celebrations.

Discussion

The two studies present significant and important contributions to the growing body of literature that acknowledges irrationality in tourist decision making. First, this study leveraged the context of a global pandemic and used wishful thinking bias as the theoretical lens to extend the literature on crisis-resistant tourism. Earlier findings suggest that crisis-resistant tourists are likely to be ‘allocentric’ travelers who are young and curious risk takers, which implies that crisis-resistance is driven by hedonic motivations (Hajibaba et al., 2015). In contrast, the current study suggests a segment of tourists who are compelled by perceived obligations and “wished away” the risks of their travel. This further adds an important caveat to earlier findings that crisis-resistant tourists are not more likely to purchase travel insurance (Hajibaba et al., 2015), which may not hold for the segment identified in our study. Second, our findings on the role of religiosity and family obligations as indirect predictors of guilt complement the under-researched area of guilty pleasure tourism, which has mainly focused on personal factors (Miao, 2010). Third, our focus on wishful thinking bias and PBC serves as a launchpad of research beyond the pandemic to other high-uncertainty contexts, such as medical tourism. For instance, future research could investigate how the interaction of factors such as prohibitive costs and the lure of beautification may influence some tourists to discount the risks of having elective cosmetic surgery in less-developed nations.

| Relations                  | Std beta | Std dev | T statistics | 95% CI LL | 0.95% CI LL |
|----------------------------|----------|---------|--------------|-----------|-------------|
| PR -> DT                   | -0.082   | 0.101   | 1.054        | -0.216    | 0.115       |
| PR × PBC -> DT            | -0.052   | 0.022   | 2.171        | -0.084    | -0.022      |
| PR -> TI                  | 0.060    | 0.077   | 0.734        | -0.075    | 0.177       |
| DT -> TI                  | 0.513    | 0.059   | 8.713        | 0.411     | 0.607       |
| PR -> DT -> TI            | -0.043   | 0.053   | 1.035        | -0.114    | 0.067       |
| PBC -> DT                 | -0.378   | 0.064   | 5.879        | -0.480    | -0.270      |
| PBC -> DT -> TI           | -0.194   | 0.047   | 4.112        | -0.282    | -0.120      |
| PR × PBC -> DT -> TI      | -0.026   | 0.011   | 2.150        | -0.044    | -0.010      |

** Significant at the <0.05 level.
*** Significant at the <0.01 level.

Fig. 3. Effect of perceived travel risk and PBC on destination trust.
Table 2
Study 2 – results of the structural path model – direct and indirect relationships.

| Relations          | Std beta | Std dev | T statistics | 95% CI LL | 0.95% CI LL |
|--------------------|----------|---------|--------------|-----------|-------------|
| FO ->Guilt         | -0.162   | 0.056   | 2.912**      | -0.254    | -0.068      |
| FO ->PBC           | -0.068   | 0.044   | 13.735**     | -0.679    | -0.536      |
| PBC ->Guilt        | 0.631    | 0.057   | 11.110**     | 0.536     | 0.722       |
| Religiosity ->Guilt| -0.051   | 0.044   | 1.100        | -0.123    | 0.022       |
| Religiosity ->PBC  | -0.158   | 0.051   | 2.967**      | -0.243    | -0.074      |
| FO ->PBC ->Guilt   | -0.384   | 0.048   | 8.084**      | -0.466    | -0.309      |
| Religiosity ->PBC ->Guilt | -0.100 | 0.033 | 2.860** | -0.156 | -0.046 |

*** Significant at the <0.01 level.

Understanding wishful thinking bias also provides important practical suggestions for travel professionals. Based on the central role of risk perceptions in motivated reasoning, we provide two contrasting managerial implications. First, travel operators who want to encourage more travels may look to strategies that give travelers further justifications to downplay risk, such as providing more comprehensive travel insurance (Sarman, Curtale, & Hajibaba, 2020). However, policy makers such as governments who want to encourage travel cautions may consider strategies that heighten risk perceptions instead. For instance, using fear appeals in public service advertisements to highlight the risks and negative consequences of indulging in pleasurable but potentially harmful behaviors (e.g. smoking or drink driving) have been largely effective (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). Future studies could verify these strategies. Alternatively, studies could also investigate other known influences of risk perceptions such as psychological distance (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007) to better inform both theory and practice during the pandemic and beyond.

Appendix. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jannals.2020.103040.

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