

TEACHER MOBILITY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE THEORIES OF REASONED ACTION AND PLANNED BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

Internationalization is a broad concept encompassing multiple facets. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) collaborators are key actors of the internationalization process and outcomes, being essential for education managers to promote internationalization initiatives, namely among their teachers. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that the number of teachers involved in those initiatives is still modest. It is therefore of utmost importance to understand how teachers initiate and maintain mobility assignments, so that HEI can implement effective strategies to promote this facet of internationalization. In this paper, we explore the teacher mobility topic through the lens of the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior. These two theories have been widely used to explain how people initiate and maintain behaviors, and are particularly relevant to understand teacher mobility. The paper includes results from phenomenological interviews with teachers that had one or more mobility experience under the Erasmus programme. The narratives of the participants in the study evidence the importance of prior intentions, attitudes and subjective norms in the resolution to undertake international assignments. Self-efficacy was also shown as determinant in the decision process of first and subsequent mobility initiatives. This paper also provides cues on how HEI can facilitate and encourage mobility experiences amongst their teaching staff.

Keywords: Teacher Mobility, HEI Internationalization, Theory of Reasoned Action, Theory of Planned Behavior, Teacher Behavior.

1 INTRODUCTION

Internationalization is a buzzword for Higher Education Institutions (HEI), often included in their goals, statistics, rankings, and indicators of attractiveness and innovation. Overall, internationalization is expected to contribute to the development of culture, attitudes, and practices that foster cross-boundary and cross-cultural perspectives in HEI activities. As such, it is expected to have an impact on the teaching and learning strategies as well as on the skills and competencies to be developed, bestowing institutions, professionals and students with better qualifications for a global working place.

As humans, it is our condition to quest for novelty. As teachers, every experience that prompts creation and discovery would be, in theory, embraced spontaneous and willingly. Staff mobility is one of the most important pillars of internationalization in HEI, and programmes such as Erasmus predict a high participation of faculty staff in mobility assignments between 2014 and 2020. Clearly, the impact such initiatives should have go far beyond individual opportunities to interact with other cultural and institutional settings. Impact should also be felt strongly, albeit gradually, in pupils, teaching and learning practices, international cooperation, institutional positioning and educational paradigms

worldwide. As such, data on internationalization levels is expected to provide regular snapshots of HEI's degree of attractiveness and innovation at all levels, in compliance with the founding principles of the European Commission [1].

The concept of internationalization is quite broad, encompassing multiple areas such as student mobility, internationalization at home, teacher mobility, capacity building, curricular relevance and innovation potential, just to name a few. For students, the participation in an exchange period has acquired the aura of a must-do activity, resulting in the exposure to new challenges and in the development of skills and competencies that can be converted into important individual and professional assets. However, there are other key actors in HEI's internationalization process, as stressed by Sanderson [2]. Staff mobility, and in particular teacher mobility, is fundamental for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge and educational practices. However, the impact such assignments may represent in a global and international educational environment have not been subject to an exhaustive pre- and post-mobility monitoring by policy makers and other HEI stakeholders. Literature points to the fact that, when compared to the student growing impetus for exchange experiences, teacher mobility is still infrequent, as only a small percentage of HEI teachers embrace those initiatives. Although there are staunch supporters of mobility among faculty staff, the vast majority has never attempted to participate. The relevancy of teachers' insights in this respect may explain why these numbers are still below expectations. Indeed, the reasoning process that triggers teachers for a mobility period abroad is closely connected with what is postulated by the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) [3, 4] and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [5, 6]. These two theories have been widely used to explain how people initiate and maintain behaviors, and are particularly relevant to understand teacher mobility. To the best of our knowledge, TRA and TPB haven't been applied to teacher mobility by extant literature. In fact, studies on teacher mobility are still scarce, especially in what concerns short-term mobility such as the ones comprised by the Erasmus+ and similar teacher exchange programmes. Hence, the next section presents a brief analysis of these two theories, which we propose as the framework for analyzing mobility experiences portrayed by 7 teachers that accepted to participate in this study. The paper includes the synthesis of the results, as well as the management implications depicted from its discussion.

2 THE THEORIES OF REASONED ACTION AND PLANNED BEHAVIOR

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) resulted from one effort to provide better understanding of how attitudes impact on behavior [3]. It asserts that the most important determinant of a person's behavior is a person's behavioral intention, which is caused by attitudes and subjective norms associated with the behavior. Behavioral beliefs associate a behavior with certain outcomes and other attributes, and determine the attitude toward the behavior in line with the subjective values of these outcomes and attributes. The stronger the belief (i.e., the greater the perceived probability that the behavior will produce a given outcome) and the more favourable or unfavourable the outcome, the stronger the impact of the belief on the attitude. Similarly, subjective norms are determined by beliefs that specific referent individuals or groups approve of the behavior (belief strength) and motivation to comply with those referents.

Later, it was understood that TRA's accuracy in explaining behavior depended on the degree to which the behavior was under volitional control, that is, the degree to which an individual can exercise control over the behavior. Perceived behavioral control is a function of the perceived probability that certain control factors are present (belief strength) and the power of these factors to facilitate or inhibit performance of the behavior [5]. Consequently, Ajzen [7] proposed the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as an extension of TRA's framework. This extension, perceived behavioral control, is an effort to account for factors outside of the individual's control that may affect the individual's intention or behavior. Ajzen's inclusion of perceived control [5] was based on the idea that behavioral performance is determined jointly by motivation (intention) and by ability (behavioral control). A person's perception of control over behavioral performance, together with intention, is expected to have a direct effect on behavior. According to Ajzen [5], human behavior is guided by three kinds of considerations: (i) beliefs about the likely outcomes of the behavior and the evaluations of these outcomes (behavioral beliefs); (ii) beliefs about the normative expectations of others and motivation to comply with these expectations (normative beliefs); and (iii) beliefs about the presence of factors that may facilitate or prevent performance of the behavior and the perceived power of these factors (control beliefs). This is the conceptual foundation of TPB. In their respective aggregates, behavioral beliefs produce a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the behavior; normative beliefs result in perceived social pressure or subjective norm; and control beliefs give rise to perceived behavioral control. In

combination - attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perception of behavioral control - lead to the formation of a behavioral intention. Given a sufficient degree of actual control over the behavior, people are expected to carry out their intentions when the opportunity arises. Intention is thus assumed to be the immediate antecedent of behavior.

Intention to perform the behavior is a central element of these models, indicating the individual's readiness to perform the behavior. Attitude as a determinant of the intention to perform the behavior is defined as a mental state involving beliefs, feelings, values, and dispositions to act in certain ways [11]. So, it is determined by expectation or beliefs concerning attributes of the object or action and evaluations of those attributes. Attitude is determined by the individual's beliefs about outcomes or attributes of performing the behavior (behavioral beliefs), weighted by evaluations of those outcomes or attributes. Thus, a person who holds strong beliefs that positively valued outcomes will result from performing the behavior will have a positive attitude towards the behavior. As explained, a subjective norm refers to an individual's perception of social norms or his/her peers' beliefs about a behavior. So, similarly, a person's subjective norm is determined by his or her normative beliefs, i.e. whether important referent individuals approve or disapprove of performing the behavior, weighted by his or her motivation to comply with those referents. A person who believes that certain referents think he or she should perform a behavior and is motivated to meet expectations of those referents, will hold a positive subjective norm.

Beliefs represent the information people have about a behavior: its likely consequences, the normative expectations of others, and the likely impediments to its performance. Behavioral interventions provide information that change some of these beliefs, or that lead to the formation of new beliefs. It is important that the information provided is as accurate as possible. According to Fishbein and Ajzen [4], the ethical reasons for this requirement are obvious, but there are other reasons as well. We may be able to change attitudes, subjective norms, or perceptions of behavioral control by providing powerful but inaccurate information relevant to these factors. Only when the new beliefs accurately reflect reality can we expect that the effect of the intervention will persist over time. Interventions directed at behavioral, normative, or control beliefs may succeed in producing corresponding changes in attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavioral control — and these changes may further influence intentions in the desired direction. The intervention will still be ineffective, however, unless individuals are in fact capable of carrying out their newly formed intentions. Hence, in case of teacher's mobility, the HEI could have a vital role as facilitator [1, 2].

Given the relevance of their proposals, both theories have been widely applied in order to predict behavior, considering the determinants of the individual decision process and presupposing that individuals make informed decisions after reflecting on the information they have. Thus, these models posit that behavior is caused by intention, which in turn is determined by attitudes and by subjective norms. TPB specifically postulates that there is an additional factor explaining both intentions and behavior, which is the perceived control over performance. Hence, the greater control the actor perceives in the action, the strongest is the intention and so the probability to exert the behavior. Perceived control is especially important regarding behaviors that involve complex goals, tasks, and outcomes, thus associated with the perception that the behavior is more or less complicated to endeavour [8]. TPB has been empirically supported in various studies, and has shown the ability to explain considerable variance on actual behavior [5, 8].

3 METHODOLOGY

Recognizing the importance of teacher mobility in accomplishing the objectives and outcomes of HEI internationalization, this paper aims to explore the factors that are associated to how teachers initiate and maintain mobility assignments following the contributions of TRA and TPB. Hence, we have adopted a qualitative approach, which enables gathering rich and detailed data that represent the feelings, behavior and perspectives of the participants involved in mobility experiences. Moreover, the phenomenological interview was the chosen technique, as we were especially interested in spontaneous narratives that could shed light on meanings and personal perspectives of the phenomenon. As Osborne [9] explains, this method emphasizes the interviewees' reflections, as they recount in their own way their experiences, being their free descriptions the basis to understand its meaning "*from the inside*". As such, the interviews started by requesting the interviewee to share his/her experience with teacher mobility and how it started, allowing the participants to naturally conduct the conversation.

Content analysis was used to identify themes and categories that emerged from the data. These included attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavioral control associated to the mobility experience. It also enabled the identification of contributions of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavioral control to mobility intentions, and contributions of intentions and perceptions of control to predict behavior (Figure 1).

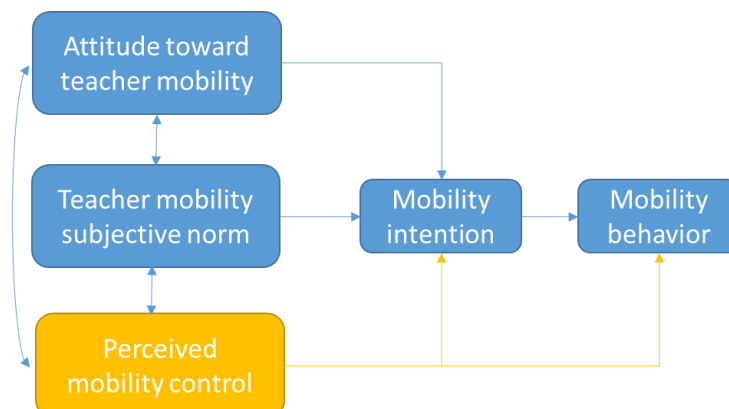


Figure 1. Conceptual model for this study: Extension of TRA and TPB to teacher mobility

Participants in this study were 7 teachers from one Portuguese University with experience in teacher mobility under the Erasmus Programme. From the total of teachers with that profile, 10 were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study, and 7 promptly accepted (see Table 1 for details). Ethical principles applicable to the research were shared in detail with the participants, who signed an informed consent authorizing the recording, transcription and use of the data for scientific purposes. The ethical principles included privacy, confidentiality and voluntary nature of the participation, as well as full information on the research and data collection.

Table 1. Sample

Interviewee	Gender	Seniority	Number of teaching mobility experiences under the Erasmus Programme
One	Female	Intermediate	4
Two	Male	Senior	3
Three	Male	Intermediate	1
Four	Female	Intermediate	1
Five	Male	Senior	1
Six	Female	Intermediate	1
Seven	Female	Senior	2

Experienced moderators conducted the interviews during the first semester of 2017. The recordings were transcribed and later deleted after the conclusion of the study. Names and any identification elements were omitted, and pseudonyms were used whenever necessary. Content analysis was performed to identify themes and categories that emanated from the spontaneous narratives of the participants. Data saturation was verified at the 6th interview, which confirmed that the sample dimension ($n = 7$) was adequate.

4 RESULTS

For a more comprehensive data analysis, and taking into account the conceptual model for this study, we followed the three levels proposed by the extension of TRA and TPB to teacher mobility: attitudes towards teacher mobility, teacher mobility subjective norms and perceived mobility control.

4.1 Attitudes towards teacher mobility

Considering that all participants in this study had some experience in teacher mobility, one would expect attitudes toward teacher mobility to be dominantly positive. In fact, most interviewees stressed their positive opinions on mobility, highlighting expected personal benefits (e.g., knowing new cultures, places and people, testing own limits, developing capabilities), as well as professional (e.g., improving teaching methods, showcasing research, developing research networks and opportunities) and institutional benefits (e.g., initiating cooperation protocols, attracting foreign students, positioning the institution internationally). Participants in this study emphasized how a consistent mobility experience is expected to improve the curriculum of the teacher, and the consolidation of academic bonds may benefit both the teacher (e.g., research collaborations) and the HEI (e.g., joint post-graduations). The participants clearly associated positive attitudes to the intention to start mobility assignments. The belief that mobility experiences have various positive impacts on teachers' careers was a very important trigger of teachers' intention.

Still, some negative aspects also emerged from the narratives, namely the poor effect that mobility seems to have on teachers' professional evaluation (e.g., Interviewee 6), and the scarce impacts on research collaborations that arise from one mobility initiative (e.g., Interviewee 4). Moreover, the teachers that shared the least positive attitudes were more reluctant to repeat the experience (*"while I still remember, I won't do it again"*, Interview 4). The same applies to the teachers that stressed the lack of recognition in terms of their professional assessment. One example was Interviewee 6 who stressed that mobility requires a great effort (regarding time, money, and other issues) that is not reflected - or at least fairly weighed - on their evaluation, despite the clear advantages it brings to the University. Consequently, these academics were more reluctant to invest on future mobility assignments, confirming the impact of less positive attitudes on mobility intention proposed by the conceptual model of this study.

4.2 Mobility subjective norms

Through the interviews there were several narratives regarding subjective norms related to teacher mobility. A clearly evident one was how the institution positions itself and the initiatives it takes to foster internationalization. The existence of cooperation protocols between HEI is the initial step of mobility under the Erasmus Programme. Moreover, each HEI promotes mobility exchange opportunities, invites teachers to present their mobility proposals every year, and offers grants for a selection of candidates. These initiatives are considered important for all teachers participating in this study, and some interviewees see mobility as a must-do event in a teachers' career, a mandatory academic activity (*"Mobility for me is fundamental. And as a teacher it should also be almost compulsory"*, Interviewee 3). Still, interviewee 1, the most experienced mobility teacher on this study, emphasized that this is a completely voluntary activity - *"it is voluntary, you go because you want to"*-, thus considering the normative influence of HEI as limited.

Another aspect related to subjective norms is the interpersonal influence received from peers, being from the same department, or from other HEI. As an example, Interviewee 4 indicated that her decision began with the testimonial of a colleague from the same department who had gone on Erasmus mobility and who shared how she had enjoyed the experience and how she was received in the host HEI. Still, all participants agreed that (i) only a limited number of colleagues have had any mobility experience and (ii) there is not much interaction related to this topic – there are recommendations and comments among the closest colleagues, but competition for grants and the best international opportunities dominate, limiting peer influence. Other participants in this study (e.g., Interviewees 5 and 7) stressed the importance of international networks, personal contacts, and peers from foreign universities in their decision process.

The relationship between attitudes and subjective norms related to teacher mobility stood out in teachers' narratives. On the one hand, teachers with more positive attitudes seem more likely to be influenced by the subjective norms, both from the HEI management and peers in general. They are aware of HEI policies and opportunities regarding internationalization, they notice who in their departments make mobility initiatives, although in this case most of the information is incomplete, due

to some secrecy and competition. On the other hand, subjective norms were in some cases the main factor explaining the willingness to undertake a mobility experience, as the teacher might feel mobility as a professional obligation or the need to conform with relevant peer groups, as well as an essential action to cope with others' expectations, being their superiors or their peers, regardless of their attitudes (*"you have to be willing to go, either you like it, or not"*, Interview 4).

4.3 Perceived mobility control

Overall, perceived mobility control was described as determinant both to their intention to undertake a mobility experience and to the actual behavior. Among the aspects related to control that participants shared were foreign languages' proficiency and being in an unfamiliar context - a new city, a new culture - together with the uncertainty associated to mobility itself. Language skills can be a clear limitation, which conditions the choice of the host university. Participants mentioned the fact that they included Anglo-Saxon countries in their wish list, but manifested their discomfort in teaching in English for natives, thus the final decision process resulted often in the choice of non-native English countries: *"Sometimes, language is a barrier as well, it doesn't mean that I speak English very well, which I don't, but I made an effort and that was it. There are people who don't have this sort of personality traits for this kind of experiences"* (Interview 4). Moreover, teachers with more international experience (e.g., studying abroad, frequently participating in international conferences) evidenced a higher perceived mobility control, as it was the case of Interviewee 2 who stated, *"I have an international background, I have no problems with that"* (Interview 2). Other aspects observable from the narratives both before their first mobility experience and when considering repeating the initiative included remarks on insufficient funding to support all expenses associated to mobility (traveling, accommodation or other) and the difficulty to deal with timetables at their own institution (as general rule, teachers have to assure no class will be missed) and at the receiving institution (so as to accommodate the invited teacher).

We also found evidence that perceived control was clearly associated to personality traits such as resilience, confidence, adventurous nature, and even enthusiasm. As explained by one of the participants, *"this puts your characteristics in effort and it's a challenge that you should enjoy. It's never easy, but... that's the point"* (Interview 1). Such personality traits were more visible amongst the teachers who were most experienced in mobility assignments (Interviewees 1, 2, and 7), precisely those who exhibited higher perceived control over mobility. The three of them described it as a natural part of their professional activity and a regular interaction with peers from other countries often results in invitations to repeat the initiative.

Perceived mobility control was also evident in the participants' analysis of HEI support. Teachers seem to be quite aware of the arduousness of practical and monetary issues, and the narratives of the interviewees indicated that a future intention to do mobility would involve (a lot of) attention to budget and to (personal and professional) time management. Moreover, the teachers that evidenced lower perceived control were more cautious when talking about future mobility experiences. A second mobility initiative was analyzed in a more rational way, weighting carefully the known costs associated with the mobility, being emotional, financial, or other: *"I paid from my own pocket to do mobility. And I swore not to do it again"* (Interview 6). Some participants presented strategies to minimize the factors that most penalized their prior experience (e.g., interviewee 4 mentioned choosing a country with a more similar culture and interviewee 3 considered choosing less expensive destinations), indicating a lower degree of involvement and enthusiasm towards future mobility initiatives. As stated by Interviewee 3, *"There have to be very special circumstances (...) in this situation it is really necessary to get all the facts and the right circumstances together"*.

Interestingly, we found also evidence of a positive impact of repeated behavior in the perceived control. Interviewee 1 explained that everyone has doubts on the first mobility, and she recalled wondering if it was successful: *"in my case, each time I go, I get more self-confidence and this greatly fuels my self-esteem... it gets easier every time"* (interview 1).

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrated the relevance of applying TRA and TPB to understand teacher mobility behavior.

5.1 Main conclusions

TRA offers important cues to analyze teacher mobility. Our results demonstrate the importance of attitudes and subjective norms in the intention to undertake a mobility initiative. In fact, the teachers that participated in this study detailed how their evaluations of teacher mobility had a positive impact on their intentions. Teachers argued that mobility benefits comprise personal, professional and institutional outcomes, and stronger beliefs were associated both to their first initiative and to greater intention to repeat mobility experiences. Furthermore, subjective norms also determine their intentions, encompassing not only the influence of the HEI policies, practices, and communication regarding internationalization in general and teacher mobility in particular, but also the influence of peers, including their departments' and their international network. Regarding peer influence, one aspect that stood out was the lack of mobility culture within departments, where interactions regarding mobility are rare, and the effect has a markedly competitive nature, intending to conform with referent others, and to gain or maintain prominent position within the department. Participants did not openly manifest the desire to improve their image, but they clearly assumed to be proud of a behavior that only a few of their colleagues have accomplished. On the contrary, international peers exert a more proactive influence, as they provide means and conditions for the mobility, and are an important actor in the outcomes, having a positive impact on attitudes and in perceived control.

This study demonstrates that the inclusion of perceived control over mobility, following the extension proposed by TPB, provides further explanation on the mobility intentions and behaviors. Some relevant topics under perceived control were language skills, and the control of valuable resources of time and money, as well as the uncertainty of dealing with an unfamiliar context.

One factor that arose from the data was the relevance of personality traits such as resilience, self-confidence and adventurous nature, just to name the most prevailing. Ajzen [5] alerts that personality traits have shown low empirical relations with behavior, and argues that only very specific and closely behavior-linked personality traits and broad attitudes may have an indirect impact on specific behaviors. This may be the case of teacher mobility behavior. Considering the results of the current study, they seem to be an essential factor determining perceived control, which may suggest the prevalence of moderator and mediator effects on intentions and behavior.

Another factor that emerged from the data was prior experience. In fact, participants in this study had variable levels of mobility and other international background, as some had repeated the mobility assignment, giving a dynamic perspective to the data. Hence, prior experience had a significant impact on perceived control (either by gaining self-confidence, or by the challenge to get control), and seem to also affect both attitudes toward teacher mobility (e.g., realizing the real impact, assessing the outcomes), and subjective norms, as the increased international networks affected the relevant others and increased the opportunities for mobility (e.g., continuous invitations, ongoing projects). These findings are consistent with the feedback effects of behavior on the antecedent variables that were inherent to the TPB model, as explained by Ajzen [5].

As a matter of fact, in the past years several authors have suggested the inclusion of additional variables in the TPB model – continuing the dynamics of its origin, which resulted exactly of one ad-on on a well-known model. On the one hand, Ajzen [5] was one of the first to confirm the relevance of including additional constructs, such as past behavior. Conner and Armitage [10] suggest the adoption of a dual-process model featuring the relationships between behavior and attitude. More recently, Montano and Kasprzyk [11] suggested what they called an Integrated Behavioral Model (IBM), comprising the variables featured in TRA/TBP models as well as other four that are expected to directly affect behavior: knowledge and skills to perform the behavior, perceived salience of the behavior, environmental constraints and habit. Thus, our results, particularly the highlighted relevance of personality traits and past experience in the explanation of mobility behavior, are consistent with contributions by other authors [e.g., 5, 10, 11].

5.2 Managerial implications

By highlighting the factors that explain teacher mobility intentions and behaviors, the two theories provide valuable cues for HEI interested in promoting such practices amongst their collaborators. HEI are an important component of subjective norms, which, according to our results, would have greater impact if teacher assessment procedures were valued more accurately by the internationalization efforts. In fact, teacher evaluation is much focused on one type of outcomes of mobility initiatives, namely research outputs such as articles, conference papers, and patents. To increase the normative influence on teacher mobility, it is necessary to find ways to assess a wider set of mobility outcomes,

namely the ones directly related to teaching. HEI can also foster relevant peer group influence, by increasing the number of protocols and mobility opportunities, and by showcasing the outcomes of the most successful mobility initiatives within departments, or even using mechanisms such as gamification, that may increase competition and provide greater gratification to the teachers that put more effort and resources in internationalization initiatives.

Moreover, considering the results of this study, HEI should also contemplate undertaking efforts to positively influence other elements shown as determinant in teacher mobility intentions and behaviors, especially perceived control. This could be fostered by, for example, better preparing teachers to successfully go on mobility, developing attractive mobility cooperation partnerships that better fit teachers' expectations and intended results, and disseminating successful strategies and outcomes of teachers' mobility initiatives that may inspire peers and help them overcome fears.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study comprised the narratives of 7 teachers of one University, thus conclusions are not to be generalized unless similar approaches are undertaken with different samples and results are further validated.

Future intentions of teachers that never undertook a mobility experience are beyond the scope of this study, but it seems to be a relevant population to replicate it, considering the importance of understanding the intentions and determinants of future mobility behavior for teachers without international experience. Moreover, focusing on such population would exclude the dynamic effect presented in this study, and the comparison of results would help validate our conclusions regarding the suggested reversed effect of mobility behavior on attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control.

Finally, we suggest that future research should explore other factors that may complement this approach. Two that clearly stood out were prior international experience and personality traits.

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