

Can Traveling Abroad Experiences Trigger Tourist Misbehaviors? The Role of Moral Relativism

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Abstract

Previous research has disproportionately focused on the positive impacts of traveling abroad experiences (TAEs) on various aspects including well-being, learning and creativity. This research challenges the conventional wisdom that TAEs are always beneficial by revealing a potential dark side of TAEs: an increase in tourist misbehaviors. The survey evidence (N = 805) with PLS-SEM analysis indicates that accumulated TAEs motivated tourists to engage in misbehaviors by increasing their moral relativism. This research contributes to the literature on tourist misbehaviors by uncovering one of its key driving forces, namely accumulated TAEs together with the internal psychological mechanism of moral relativism. It also advances the moral psychology literature by revealing accumulated TAEs as a driver of moral relativism. The findings provide managerial implications to prevent tourist misbehaviors.

Keywords: Tourist misbehavior; moral relativism; traveling abroad experiences

Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that *desirable* tourist behavior can enhance the wellbeing of residents at a tourist destination and thus increase their support for tourism-related development (Tsauro et al., 2018), whereas *undesirable* tourist behavior can damage the relationship between tourists and residents and intensify social conflict at the tourist destination (Zhang et al., 2017). The collective effects of globalization, the increasing development of tourist destinations, and advances in technology are contributing to a rapid expansion in overseas travel. The need to understand tourism behavior is especially urgent given that reports of *tourist misbehaviors* are on the rise. These refer to behaviors that “violate conventions, rules, regulation, laws, or social mores” in traveling situations (Tsauro et al., 2019, p. 35), such as littering, graffiti, and cutting queues (see Li & Chen, 2017). [Nonetheless, in contrast to the extensive research on the positive aspects of tourist behavior, the negative aspects of tourist behavior have received little attention thus far in the literature.](#)

Tourism can be viewed as a permissive domain that provides tourists with a new environment in which they are relatively free to ignore the daily norms and regulations of their domestic countries (Turner & Ash, 1975) and to engage in irrational behaviors and even misbehaviors (Wang, 2000). [Uriely, Ram, and Malach-Pines \(2011\) introduced the perspective of psychodynamic sociology to explain the phenomenon of tourist misbehavior. They argued that misbehavior could be tourists’ way of expressing their unconscious needs. Although previous studies on tourist misbehaviors \(e.g., Crouch, 2013\) have contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon, the factors motivating tourists to engage in misbehaviors remain unidentified, and the internal mechanisms of this motivation are unclear.](#)

[There has been extensive research into the antecedents of different travel experiences \(e.g., Huang & Hsu, 2009; Tung & Ritchie, 2011\), but the subsequent and enduring influences of travel experiences on tourists’ value perceptions and behavioral intentions have yet to be fully revealed.](#)

This is particularly true for *traveling abroad experiences* (hereafter, TAEs), given that tourists can experience exotic cultures. The existing literature has emphasized the bright side of TAEs including, but not limited to, an increased sense of well-being (e.g., Moal-Ulvoas, 2017), increased knowledge (e.g., Falk et al., 2012), and enhanced creativity (e.g., Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). In contrast, less attention has been paid to the negative impacts of extensive TAEs.

Drawing on the perspective of moral psychology (e.g., Lu et al., 2017; Sulsky, Marcus & MacDonald, 2016), this research aims to unpack the negative impacts of TAEs. We argue that accumulated TAEs not only enable tourists to immerse themselves in foreign cultures and increase their mental flexibility, but also make them more morally flexible. As tourists come into contact with foreign cultures, they may learn that different cultures uphold different standards on the same moral issues, and consequently construe moral rules and principles as culturally relative rather than absolute. Accordingly, TAEs nurture not only cognitive flexibility, but also moral relativism (hereafter, MR). That is, accumulated TAEs not only empower tourists to break mental rules but may also make them more disposed to bend moral rules, thereby increasing their tendency for misbehaviors.

To test our predictions, we conducted a survey to examine the relationships between accumulated TAEs, MR, and tourist misbehaviors. The survey evidence revealed the undesirable consequences of TAEs, which manifested as an increase in MR and tourist misbehaviors. This research thereby contributes to the fledgling literature on tourist misbehavior by identifying one of its key driving forces, namely accumulated TAEs together with the internal psychological mechanism of MR. It questions the conventional wisdom that traveling abroad is always beneficial (e.g., Hsu, Cai, & Wong, 2007) and offers a more balanced and objective view on the impacts of TAEs. Our findings will help destination development decision-makers, marketing specialists, and source market organizations to prevent tourist misbehaviors and achieve sustainable tourism development.

Literature Review

Tourist misbehavior

Tourist misbehavior refers to behavioral acts by tourists that accidentally or intentionally violate conventions, rules, regulation, laws, or social norms in traveling situations (Tsaur, Cheng, & Hong, 2019). As traveling temporarily separates tourists from the social constraints and norms that govern their daily lives (Turner & Ash, 1975), tourists often engage in misbehavior while on a trip. Cutting queues, graffiti, excessive drinking, and taking photographs without permission are common examples of misbehavior in traveling contexts (e.g., Tsang, Prideaux, & Lee, 2016; Uriely, Ram, & Malach-Pines, 2011). These types of misbehavior are not only destructive to tourism resources but also disrupt other tourists' experiences and can result in losses for tourism enterprises and travel organizations.

For example, when tourists visit attractions, certain kinds of their misbehavior (e.g., littering, carving words) can damage the tourism environment or the natural and cultural resources at the tourist site (Clark, Hendee, & Campbell, 1971). Tsang et al. (2016) found that misbehavior exhibited by visitors at a theme park (e.g., jumping queues for rides and spitting on the floor) significantly reduced other visitors' satisfaction and revisit intention. A recent study revealed that tourist misbehavior (e.g., talking loudly in public) could seriously disrupt the normal operations of service companies (Tsaur et al., 2019). Given these destructive impacts of tourist misbehaviors, it is of great theoretical and practical importance to study their antecedents and effectively prevent their occurrence.

Tourist misbehavior could be induced by various factors, such as cultural differences between the home and destination or unfamiliarity with local norms (e.g., Tolkach, Pratt, & Zeng, 2017). According to Turner and Ash (1975), traveling temporarily takes people away from their regular environments and can provide some freedom from the social constraints that regulate their daily

lives. Uriely et al. (2011) argued that tourists' unconscious needs, such as the need to release aggression, might be triggered when they are away from their regular environments, thus leading to misbehavior. Recent research has also discovered that tourists from Western societies were more likely to engage in unethical behavior, such as purchasing counterfeit products, when visiting Eastern countries than when they were at home (Tolkach et al., 2017). However, the question of why tourists tend to engage in more misbehavior when they travel abroad than when they are at home remains largely unanswered.

Travel abroad experiences (TAEs)

The increasing prevalence of travel abroad has stimulated substantial research interest in its consequences (e.g., Cao, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2014; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012). Studies have shown that TAEs increase levels of happiness (Nawijn, 2010), well-being (Chen, Lehto, & Cai, 2013) and life satisfaction (Strauss-Blasche, Ekmekcioglu, & Marktl, 2000). Furthermore, these positive aspects encourage tourists to explore, learn, and play, which broadens their scope of attention, cognition, and action (de Bloom et al., 2014). In addition, TAEs breaks tourists' daily routines, as they get out of bed and eat meals at different times of the day from usual and spend much more time on leisure activities than they normally would. This is why TAEs can not only help relieve work-related demands and stress (Westman & Eden, 1997), but also improve creative thinking (Maddux, Adam, & Galinsky, 2010).

TAEs provides tourists with a range of new experiences: tasting exotic food, learning foreign languages, and experiencing diverse cultural habits and customs. Travel abroad exposes tourists to the diversity of beliefs, values, conventions, and behavior that prevail in different cultures and thus help them to integrate different perspectives on the same issues (Tadmor et al., 2012). These TAEs may also break down their established mental schemas and broaden their cognitive scope. Ritter et al. (2012) observed that diversifying experiences (e.g., foreign travel), characterized by active

exposure to unusual events or situations, “violate normality, break cognitive schemas, and promote a thinking style characterized by cognitive flexibility” (p. 964). A subsequent tourism study also argued that TAEs can promote cognitive flexibility— “the ability to break ordinary patterns of thought, to overcome functional fixedness and to avoid a reliance on conventional ideas or solutions” (de Bloom et al., 2014, p. 165).

The enhanced cognitive flexibility cultivated by experiences of travel abroad can enhance people’s creativity (e.g., Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). Research on creativity has shown that exposure to different cultures enables people to learn, connect, and integrate seemingly disparate ideas, thus helping them to develop novel and creative insights. For example, travel abroad can help artists to create work that is more admired (de Bloom et al., 2014) and motivate researchers to publish articles that are more insightful (Franzoni et al., 2014). However, an important yet underexplored possibility is that TAEs may not only promote cognitive flexibility, but lead tourists to think and act in a more morally flexible manner.

The role of moral relativism

Moral relativism (MR) refers to “the degree to which an individual rejects universal moral rules when making ethical judgments” (Swaidan, Rawwas, & Vitell, 2008, p.128). MR holds that moral rules or standards cannot be simply derived from universal principles, but are instead a function of time, place, and culture (Lee & Sirgy, 1999). People who are low in MR strictly adhere to universal moral principles and act in ways that are consistent with what they regard as general moral rules and standards (Forsyth, 1980). In contrast, people who are high in MR do not believe in universal rules for making moral judgments and often rely heavily on the situational circumstances, feeling that what is moral or immoral depends on the nature of the situation, the prevailing culture, and the individuals involved (Harman, 1975).

Given that MR involves more relaxed moral standards in general, it may induce great leniency toward behavior of the self and others that is widely regarded as immoral. As pointed out by Rai and Holyoak (2013), “the fact that relativism describes morality as subjective and culturally-historically contingent, whereas absolutism describes morality as objective and universal—makes individuals more likely to engage in immoral behaviors when exposed to moral relativism compared to moral absolutism” (p. 995). Indeed, the causal relationship between MR and immoral behavior has been supported by empirical studies. Sulsky, Marcus and MacDonald (2016) found that people judged theft behavior as less unethical when they are high (vs. low) in MR. Likewise, a subsequent study demonstrated that students exhibiting high MR were more likely to do cheating behavior (Lu et al., 2017). In the context of tourism, we argue that tourists who exhibit high MR are more likely to engage in immoral or misbehaviors in traveling situations.

As tourists become immersed in foreign cultures by accumulating various TAEs, they may realize that different countries or regions have different moral standards or principles, and thus may come to see moral criteria as relative rather than absolute. In other words, when tourists are exposed to multiple moral codes by visiting a broad range of foreign places, they are more likely to take a position of MR —the view that describes moral rules and norms as subjective or culturally informed (Rai & Holyoak, 2013). Rai and Holyoak (2013) argued that MR involves more “relaxed moral standards,” weakens moral commitment, and subsequently increases the tendency to engage in immoral behaviors. Accordingly, we predicted that increased MR resulting from accumulated TAEs would increase the propensity of tourists to engage in misbehavior (e.g., littering, graffiti, and jaywalking; see Li & Chen, 2017). In addition, variance attribution theory highlights the importance of gaining a variety of experiences in different contexts to shaping generalized attitudes and beliefs (Kelley, 1967). The same logic can be applied to the formation of MR through accumulating TAEs. In other words, accumulating more TAEs exposes more set of moral codes, and thus be conducive to induce MR and subsequent tourist misbehaviors (see Figure 1. the conceptual model).

Method

To test our model, 805 U.S. respondents (33.7% female; 82.6% aged 21–50 years old) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk) in June 2020 to participate in the study. Mturk is a global online survey platform and recent studies indicate that MTurk data largely afford demographic diversity (e.g., Yang et al., 2020; 2021). All the participants were given a monetary reward in exchange for their participation. The Participants were asked to indicate the countries that they had traveled to from a list compiled by the World Bank (2018) of the world's top 50 most popular tourist destinations (in terms of their numbers of inbound international tourists).

We measured participant's accumulated TAEs [according to the number of countries with popular tourist destinations that the participant had visited \(see Cao et al., 2014\)](#). We measured MR using a 6-item, 7-point scale (i.e., from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) [adapted from Forsyth \(1980\)](#). The six items were “moral standards are relative rather than absolute,” “lying is not always wrong,” “what one person judges as ‘moral’ may be judged as ‘immoral’ by another person,” “moral rules should not be followed absolutely,” “whether a behavior is moral or immoral depends on the situation,” and “what is moral varies from one society to another” ($\alpha = 0.86$). [We assessed each participant's tourist misbehaviors using a 12-item, 7-point scale \(i.e., from 1 = *never* to 7 = *very frequently*\) adopted from Li and Chen \(2017\)](#). Using this scale, the participants rated the frequency at which they had engaged in tourist misbehaviors during their previous TAEs. The items that were listed as tourist misbehaviors on this scale included “littering on a tour,” “graffiti,” “making a racket in public,” “trampling on lawns,” “climbing sculptures or trees to take a photo,” “feeding animals at the zoo,” “taking a photo without waiting in line,” “smoking in a non-smoking area,” “urinating in public,” “not flushing the toilet,” “jaywalking,” and “not turning off one's phone on the plane” ($\alpha = 0.97$) (see Li & Chen, 2017, p. 155). Participants' age, gender and income level were included as

control variables. Travel frequency and travel spending were controlled, given that the two variables are positively related to tourist misbehaviors (see Li & Chen, 2017). Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the study sample.

Results

We tested the conceptual model using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to examine the reliability and validity of the measurement model. The composite reliability of each construct was higher than 0.820, and the ρ As were all above 0.88, indicating an acceptable reliability level suggested by Bagozzi and Kimmel (1995). Regarding the validity measurement, all standardized factor loadings were above 0.67 at 1% significant level and the construct average variance extracted (AVEs) were beyond 0.5, suggesting a satisfactory convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). The correlation between constructs was smaller than the corresponding square root of AVEs, supporting good discriminant validities (Hair et al., 2010). Discriminant validity was also assessed by the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). As all the HTMTs were significantly less than the unit at 5% significant level and below 0.9, thereby representing a satisfactory validity level (Fan et al., 2020). In addition, all correlations were significant at 1% level, meaning the nomological validity was established (Hair et al., 2010). Prior to the structural model examination, common method bias (CMB) was examined with variance inflation factor (VIF). It is argued that, if VIFs resulting from a full collinearity test are equal to or lower than 3.3, the model can be considered free of CMB (Kock, 2015). In the current study, all VIFs were well below 1.58, indicating that there is no CMB issues with the dataset.

Results revealed that the relationship between accumulated TAEs and tourist misbehaviors was significant ($\beta = 0.05$; $p < .05$), the relationships between MR and tourist misbehaviors ($\beta = 0.27$; $p < .001$) and the relationships between accumulated TAEs and MR ($\beta = 0.17$; $p < .001$) were also

significant (see Figure 1). The indirect effect between accumulated TAEs and tourist misbehaviors via MR is significant ($\beta = 0.05$; $p < .001$). To summarize, these results suggest that accumulated TAEs is associated with tourist misbehaviors and the relationship between accumulated TAEs and tourist misbehaviors is fully mediated by MR.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In addition, we used PROCESS (an SPSS macro) (Hayes, 2013) to test our model. This approach allowed us to test the significance of the indirect effect of accumulated of TAEs on tourist misbehaviors with a bootstrapping technique (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We conducted the mediation analyses using Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The results revealed that the effect of accumulated TAEs on tourist misbehaviors was significantly mediated by MR, which had a point estimate of 0.01 (Boot S.E. = 0.003; 95% CI: [.0052, .0179]). The direct effect of accumulated TAEs was not significant for tourist misbehaviors. Thus, the results further confirm the mediating role of MR on the relationship between accumulated TAEs and tourist misbehaviors.

Conclusion

Despite the extensive research into TAEs, this study is among the first to identify their potential negative impacts; specifically, their effects in promoting tourist misbehaviors. Previous studies have disproportionately emphasized the positive outcomes from TAEs, such as their effects in promoting stress relief (de Bloom et al., 2014), lifelong learning (Falk et al., 2012), and generalized trust (Cao et al., 2014). In contrast, our findings provide empirical evidence that broad experiences of traveling abroad can promote MR and thus increase tourist misbehaviors. These findings shed new light on the outcomes of TAEs and provide a more balanced and objective view of such experiences.

Theoretical Contributions

This research timely responds to the call for future research on tourist misbehavior by Li and Chen (2019). Tourist misbehaviors—including both deliberate and unintentional acts—are relatively prevalent in the global tourism industry. Tourist misbehaviors have negative impacts to tourism resources and are detrimental to others' traveling experiences. They may also cause unnecessary losses to the businesses of tour operators and travel agents. Nevertheless, the literature on tourist misbehaviors remains very limited. Most studies have described tourist misbehaviors or identified their negative impacts (Li & Chen, 2017), leaving in question the underlying mechanisms that account for these behaviors. To this end, the present study contributes to the incipient literature on tourist misbehaviors by uncovering a new and profound antecedent: accumulated TAEs. Intriguingly, our findings suggest that a tourist who visits a greater number of countries is more likely to engage in more tourist misbehaviors.

This study also contributes to research on moral psychology by identifying an important antecedent of MR. Depart from the research that explored the negative influences of MR (Rai & Holyoak, 2013), our research proposes and demonstrates one important driving factor in relation to tourism: accumulated TAEs. Specifically, our findings indicate that tourists display greater MR when they have had more (vs. fewer) experiences of traveling abroad. By integrating the fields of tourism and moral psychology, our research enriches the understanding of how MR is cultivated. Furthermore, our empirical findings echo and extend the findings of Rai and Holyoak (2013) by showing that MR can induce tourist misbehaviors.

Managerial Implications

This research provides practical guidelines for preventing and managing tourist misbehaviors. We reveal that tourist misbehaviors could be induced by tourists' MR. This suggests weakening

tourists' belief of MR so as to prevent the potential toll of tourist misbehaviors. One way to attenuate their MR is to set strict ethical values and codes of conduct. For example, tourist attractions and destinations should establish clear rules to regulate tourist behavior and impose appropriate penalties on visitors who intentionally break these rules. The penalties will serve as a warning of the cost of breaking rules, which may restrain tourists' intention to engage in misbehaviors.

Our findings suggest that tourists with rich traveling abroad experiences may have high levels of MR and thus are more likely to engage in misbehaviors. We thus suggest that destination stakeholders may pay more attention to foreign tourists especially those with abundant experiences of traveling abroad. For example, given that foreign tourists are unfamiliar with local norms and customs, destination governments and tourism operators are advised to offer tourist education to them by stressing the harmfulness of tourist misbehaviors and promoting responsible tourism.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although our research contributes to a better understanding of tourist misbehaviors by making an initial exploration of the dark side of traveling abroad, there are still several limitations in the current research. First, although we investigated one key driver of tourist misbehaviors (i.e., accumulated TAEs), other factors could also increase the propensity for tourist misbehaviors. For instance, Uriely et al. (2011) proposed that tourist misbehaviors could be driven by tourists' unconscious needs to "release" their aggression. Moreover, research has indicated that different types of tourists can express aggression in different ways. For example, young and heavy-drinking tourists often become involved in fights with others, whereas traveling football fans often engage in hooliganism (Kerr & de Kock, 2002). Thus, future research may explore other factors that may stimulate specific forms of tourist misbehaviors.

Second, we did not consider the influence of a tourist destination's image on a tourist's behavior. For instance, some of the tour destinations, such as "Pattaya in Thailand, Manali in India and Ibiza in Spain", "are associated with sex tourism, drug tourism and violent behavior of young tourists respectively" (Uriely et al., 2011, p.1066). Given that some tourism destinations have specific social and cultural characteristics (Uriely et al., 2011), it is worth exploring whether the local customs and cultures of tourist destinations saliently influence tourist misbehaviors.

Finally, future research could extend our findings by exploring tourist misbehaviors at the group level. Most of the literature on tourist misbehaviors has focused exclusively on the behaviors of individual tourists. However, individuals are often influenced by the behaviors and experiences of their peers (Lin et al., 2019). Likewise, individual tourists may adopt the behaviors of their traveling companions, especially specific misbehaviors that tend to be spread in groups (e.g., graffiti). Compared to individual acts of vandalism, misbehaviors by groups have the potential to cause greater damage to tourist destinations. Therefore, additional studies should explore ways to prevent and regulate tourist misbehaviors at the group level.

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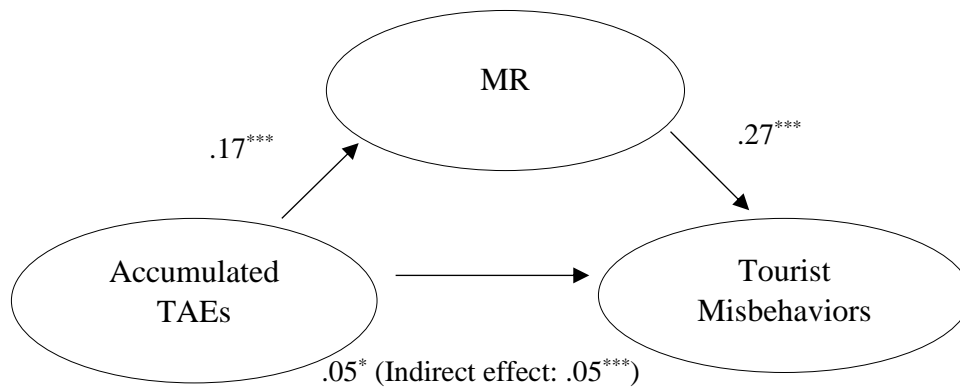
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Table 1. *Demographic Profile of the Study Sample (N = 805)*

	Demographic traits	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	66.3%
	Female	33.7%
Age	≤ 20	1.0%
	21–30	35.4%
	31–40	29.4%
	41–50	17.8%
	51–60	11.3%
	> 60	5.1%
Income level	USD\$0–\$9,999	4.5%
	USD\$10,000–\$19,999	5.3%
	USD\$20,000–\$29,999	11.1%
	USD\$30,000–\$39,999	9.8%
	USD\$40,000–\$49,999	14.7%
	USD\$50,000–\$59,999	14.2%
	USD\$60,000–\$69,999	11.1%
	USD\$70,000–\$79,999	9.2%
	USD\$80,000–\$89,999	5.0%
	USD\$90,000–\$99,999	6.5%
USD\$100,000 or more	8.8%	
Annual travel frequency	1–2 times	47.2%
	3–5 times	43.0%
	More than 5 times	9.8%
Annual travel expenditure	Less than USD\$1000	12.8%
	USD\$1000 to \$1999	22.5%
	USD\$2000 to \$4999	36.3%
	USD\$5000 to \$9999	15.7%
	USD\$10,000 to \$19,999	6.1%
	USD\$20,000 or more	6.7%

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Note. Significance levels are denoted by * at $p < .05$, ** at $p < .01$, and *** at $p < .001$.