

Morality and transport behavior: Predicting car use in three European countries

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Despite various policy efforts to reduce car use, it is still growing throughout the Western world. Previous research indicates that individuals perceive cars as superior to other modes of transport on many dimensions, including comfort, time, money, pleasure, and privacy. In contrast, moral considerations about the environmental impact of cars appeared to have little impact on people's transport behavior, indicating that cost-benefit considerations seem to be far more important than moral considerations.

Most research on car use has focused either on overall car use or on car use for specific purposes (mostly commuting trips). It is possible that using a car is more attractive for these types of trips than using other modes of transport. However, for short-distance car trips, the difference in attractiveness between using a car and using alternative modes of transport may be smaller, because attractive alternatives such as walking and cycling are available. As previous research has shown that moral considerations predict low-cost behavior better than high-cost behavior (see Lindenberg & Steg, 2007), moral considerations may be more important as predictors of short-distance car use than of overall car use. We tested this hypothesis in this study to learn more about the applicability of this process to car use and to assess the potential effectiveness of interventions to reduce car use that are based on moral appeals.

We administered online questionnaires to representative samples of France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland ($N = 4,539$). Every participant completed a questionnaire on either overall or short-distance car use. The norm-activation model (NAM) was used

to assess participants' moral considerations regarding overall or short-distance car use. The NAM states that moral considerations are directly predictive of behavior.

The results supported our hypothesis. The NAM explained a larger proportion of variance in short-distance car use compared to overall car use. In all three countries, moral considerations predicted around 13% of variance in short-distance car use while they predicted less than five percent of variance in overall car use.

These results fit our proposition that moral considerations are more predictive of low-cost than high-cost behaviors. This means that for relatively easy behaviors, such as reducing the number of short-distance car trips, moral considerations are relevant antecedents, while for more costly behaviors, moral considerations are less important antecedents. These findings indicate that for types of car use that are relatively easy to change, moral appeals to reduce car use are potentially effective to change behavior.

The three countries in which the study was conducted differ on various relevant aspects, such as infrastructure and population density. The fact that we found highly similar results in these countries shows the robustness of our findings and indicates the likely generalizability of these results to other developed countries.

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References

- Lindenberg, S., & Steg, L. (2007). Normative, gain, and hedonic goal-frames guiding environmental behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, 63(1), 117-137.