

From home to destination: How psychological ownership shapes tourists' pro-environmental behaviors

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INTRODUCTION

Pro-environmental behavior (PEB) is central to sustainable tourism, yet individuals who behave responsibly at home often exhibit weaker environmental engagement when traveling. Existing tourism research has largely treated PEB as a stable individual tendency, overlooking contextual shifts between home and destination settings and leaving the decline of sustainable behavior during travel insufficiently explained (Kumar & Nayak, 2019; Qiu et al., 2025).

Psychological ownership (PO), the feeling that a target is “mine”, provides a useful lens to address this gap. Grounded in Psychological Ownership Theory (Pierce et al., 2001, 2003), PO has been shown to promote stewardship and environmentally responsible behavior in tourism contexts (Xu et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2025). However, PO is context-dependent and may weaken at destinations due to reduced familiarity and personal relevance, potentially diminishing pro-environmental behavior. The Norm Activation Model further explains how PO translates into behavior through awareness of consequences (AC) and ascribed responsibility (AR), which activate moral motivation (Kumar & Nayak, 2019). Although AC and AR are established predictors of pro-environmental behavior (Xu et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2025), their roles across home and travel contexts remain underexplored.

Addressing these gaps, this study examines how psychological ownership shapes tourists' energy conservation and waste reduction across home and destination contexts, and whether these relationships operate through awareness of consequences and ascribed responsibility. By integrating Psychological Ownership Theory with the Norm Activation Model, the study offers a context-sensitive explanation for the decline of sustainable behavior during travel. Based on literature review, the following research model was developed and tested.

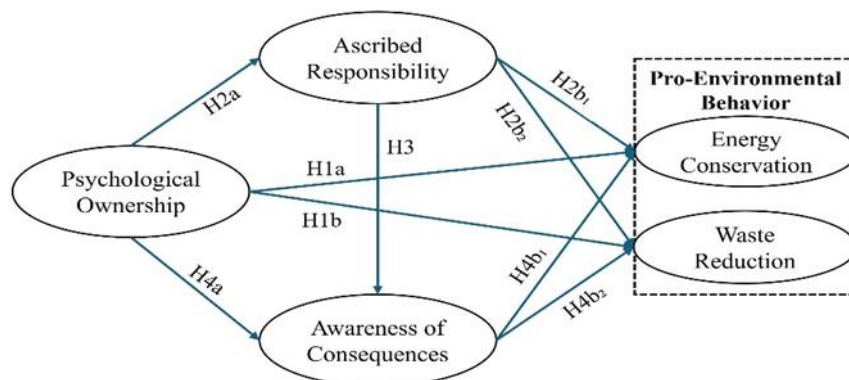


Figure 1. Research Model

METHOD

Data were collected via Embrain from Korean international travelers (19+) who had traveled abroad within the preceding three months. The survey instrument comprised items adapted from prior studies, reformulated to facilitate home-destination comparison. All constructs were measured using a 7-point bipolar comparative scale, ranging from -3 (higher at home) to +3 (higher at the destination), with 0 indicating no difference. To ensure linguistic and conceptual validity, the instrument was translated into Korean, underwent expert review, and was pre-tested. Data collection (January 1–23, 2026) involved an initial pre-test (n=150) followed by a main study, resulting in a final sample of 400 respondents.

Descriptive statistics were analyzed using SPSS, while structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships and mediation effects.

FINDINGS

The final sample ($n = 400$) was predominantly female (65.0%) and aged 30~39 years (38.5%). Most participants held a bachelor's degree and traveled primarily for leisure purposes. East Asia emerged as the most frequent destination, with the majority of trips characterized by a duration of three to four nights and a preference for group travel.

The measurement model demonstrated robust reliability and validity. All retained items exhibited factor loadings exceeding the 0.70 threshold. Internal consistency and convergent validity were confirmed, as Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values surpassed recommended levels, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.60. Furthermore, discriminant validity was established through both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios.

Descriptive statistics revealed significant contextual shifts between home and destination environments. Specifically, Psychological Ownership (PO) and Pro-environmental Behaviors (PEB), particularly in energy conservation and waste reduction, were more pronounced at home. Conversely, Ascription of Responsibility (AR) and Awareness of Consequences (AC) were relatively higher at the destination, suggesting distinct psychological and behavioral transitions during international travel.

Assessment of the structural model indicated no multicollinearity issues, as all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values remained well below the recommended thresholds. The model accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in AR ($R^2 = 0.726$), followed by moderate variance in PEB–energy conservation ($R^2 = 0.283$) and PEB–waste reduction ($R^2 = 0.267$). The variance explained for AC was modest ($R^2 = 0.164$). Furthermore, all endogenous constructs exhibited adequate predictive relevance, with Q^2 values exceeding zero.

Table 1. Structural Path Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	Decision	f^2
H1a	PO → PEB (Energy Conservation)	0.382	7.311	0.000	Supported	.150
H1b	PO → PEB (Waste Reduction)	0.365	5.893	0.000	Supported	.134
H2a	PO → AC	0.404	8.726	0.000	Supported	.196
H2b ₁	AC → PEB (Energy Conservation)	0.304	3.565	0.000	Supported	.039
H2b ₂	AC → PEB (Waste Reduction)	0.190	2.232	0.026	Supported	.015
H3	AC → AR	0.756	21.318	0.000	Supported	1.744
H4a	PO → AR	0.192	4.976	0.000	Supported	0.112
H4b ₁	AR → PEB (Energy Conservation)	−0.112	1.210	0.226	Not supported	.005
H4b ₂	AR → PEB (Waste Reduction)	0.007	0.074	0.941	Not supported	.000

Note: Paths with $p < .05$ are significant.

As indicated in Table 1, the home-away difference in PO was positively associated with both dimensions of PEB and exerted a significant positive influence on AC and AR. While the home-away difference in AC significantly enhanced both energy conservation and waste reduction and demonstrated a particularly robust effect on AR, AR itself did not significantly influence either PEB dimension.

The mediation analysis revealed that the home-away difference in AC significantly mediated the relationship between PO and both PEB dimensions: energy conservation (indirect effect = 0.123, $p = .001$) and waste reduction (indirect effect = 0.077, $p = .038$). Conversely, AR did not function as a significant mediator in these pathways. Regarding control variables, age was positively correlated with PEB, whereas gender, education, and travel expenses yielded no significant effects.

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides significant theoretical and practical insights into the dynamics of pro-environmental behavior (PEB) in tourism. Theoretically, it refines the application of psychological

ownership (PO) as a context-sensitive construct. Contrary to extant tourism literature suggesting that tourists readily develop destination-based ownership, the findings from a direct home–destination comparison reveal a more constrained transfer process. Psychological ownership appears predominantly anchored in the home environment. Its failure to fully transition to the destination context offers a compelling explanation for the observed decline in PEB during travel.

Consistent with this logic, psychological ownership influenced PEB primarily through awareness of consequences (AC), while ascribed responsibility (AR) failed to elicit behavioral change. This indicates that responsibility-based mechanisms lose efficacy when ownership feelings are weak or psychologically detached in destination settings. Furthermore, by distinguishing between energy conservation and waste reduction, the results underscore that PEB is behavior-specific rather than a uniform construct.

Practically, destination managers should prioritize interventions that enhance consequence salience. Rather than relying solely on appeals to personal responsibility, utilizing situational prompts, real-time impact feedback, and context-specific messaging to bolster AC represents a more reliable pathway for sustaining PEB among international travelers.

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