

A conceptual model of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility: integrating self-determination theory and theory of planned behavior

Abstract

Purpose – Companies target globally mobile workers and face the war for talent, while individuals are more reluctant to engage in global mobility. This scenario led us to propose a model to understand the individuals' decision process to engage in global mobility.

Design/methodology/approach – Building on the self-determination theory, the theory of planned behavior and the literature on decisions for global mobility, the authors propose mechanisms through which psychological variables and assignments' factual and perceived contextual aspects (directly or indirectly) explain the decision to engage or not in global mobility.

Findings – This study offers a conceptual model with the authors' novel propositions to explain individuals' decision to engage in global mobility.

Originality - The model provides a more comprehensive explanation of the individuals' decision-making process to engage in global mobility than previous models and potentially yields more effective organizational practices to attract both well-established and emerging phenomena of globally mobile workers.

Keywords - Global mobility, Self-determination theory, Theory of planned behavior.

Paper type - Conceptual paper

1. INTRODUCTION

Global mobility (GM) encompasses situations where workers engage in international assignments for short, mid, or long missions, either physically (in-person global mobility) or virtually (virtual global mobility) (Caligiuri, 2023). GM incorporates various well-established assignment forms, such as assigned expatriates (Bonache *et al.*, 2001) and self-initiated expatriates (Suutari and Brewster, 2000), and more recent concepts, such as flexpatriates (Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert, 2004), and virtual assignments (Selmer *et al.*, 2022). Despite differences across these typologies, common issues affect the range of global mobile workers: individuals may exhibit reluctance to engage in global mobility due to factors primarily related to concerns with family well-being, cultural and linguistic differences, temporal boundaries, career concerns, and political nationalism (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016; Dickmann, 2018; Farndale *et al.*, 2020; Horak *et al.*, 2019; Mockaitis *et al.*, 2018). Local and multinational organizations, however, continue targeting globally mobile workers because their qualifications can transcend nationality and become assets to them (Cerdin *et al.*, 2014). Individuals' concerns and the war for talent make it difficult for those companies to attract the necessary workforce (Farndale *et al.*, 2020; Tung, 2016). Critically, a shortage of skilled labor can impact companies' performance, meaning that if individuals are more hesitant to engage in global mobility a lack of international workforce is even more likely to happen. There is, therefore, a need to understand the predictors of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility. Such comprehension can supplement the global mobility literature and inform managers about why and how individuals decide to undertake GM assignments, enabling companies to be more effective in their efforts to attract global mobile workers.

Previous studies have identified numerous antecedents of individuals' intention or decision to engage in global mobility. These include the influence of personal variables, such as gender, family configurations, level of education, and foreign language proficiency (e.g., Dupuis *et al.*, 2008; Froese *et al.*, 2013; Ipek and Paulus, 2021), the push and pull factors that drive decisions (e.g., McNulty and Vance, 2017; Suutari *et al.*, 2012), and psychological determinants of individuals' intention to expatriate, including aspects such as personality traits (e.g., Baluku *et al.*, 2018) and cultural intelligence (e.g., Richter *et al.*, 2020).

While companies do not have control over many of these antecedents, they can intervene in individuals' behavior through the psychological process (i.e., behaviors are most easily changed by appealing to the person's motives, goals, and expectations). Therefore, changing behaviors require analysis at the psychological level (Ryan and Deci, 2017), which

led scholars to apply the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985) to explain individuals' intention to expatriate (e.g., Engle *et al.*, 2015; Froese *et al.*, 2013; Joardar and Weisang, 2019). TPB focuses on three socio-cognitive variables (attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control). Also focusing on the psychological level of analysis, researchers applied the career construction theory and identified that career adaptability was positively related to expatriate career intentions (Presbitero and Quita, 2017). Other studies (e.g., Haines *et al.*, 2008; Madi *et al.*, 2023) have relied on other psychological theories, such as the self-determination theory (SDT), which underlines the qualitative aspects of motivation (as opposed to the amount of motivation) and suggests that autonomous and controlled forms of motivation result in behaviors of varying quality and dynamics (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2017).

Although these studies have shed some light on the antecedents of individuals' decision to expatriate, significant gaps remain. First, the studies based on psychological theories have primarily relied on socio-cognitive or motivational theories. Using socio-cognitive and motivational theories separately to understand individuals' decision to engage in global mobility provides a fragmented understanding of the decision-making because each perspective partially explains the entire psychological process. While socio-cognitive theories (such as the TPB) address how individuals make sense of the information they have access to (information processing), they overlook the conditions that make activities and behaviors desired (Deci and Ryan, 1985). In turn, motivational theories (such as the SDT) identify the reasons why individuals engage in specific behaviors but do not reveal the process through which motivation translates into behavioral intentions and behaviors (Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2009). Remarkably, motivational and socio-cognitive theories, especially the TPB and the SDT, have been previously integrated to explain behaviors in various fields, including health-related research and entrepreneurship (e.g., Chan *et al.*, 2014; Gagné, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2020). The scholars understood that using both theories together offers complementary explanations of the process preceding action (Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2020). As such, our study proposes a conceptual model that integrates psychological variables from the TPB and the SDT to gain a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior, elucidating the psychological mechanisms that lead to intentional action. In our integrated model, autonomous and controlled types of motivation from SDT provide the source of information to form individuals' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. These socio-cognitive variables then inform the intention to

engage in global mobility, which, in turn, explains individuals' decision to participate in global mobility.

Second, GM literature has overlooked the context in which the decision is made. It is crucial to consider the contextual conditions, factual or perceptual, that can enhance our understanding of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility. We address it by incorporating boundary conditions into the model. Based on previous studies that link individuals' attitudes to contextual aspects (Tharenou, 2008), we can assume that smaller psychic distance is associated with individuals feeling more confident about their knowledge and skills to understand and adapt to a new environment. However, previous studies have not focused on the perception of such distance and whether the perceived differences weaken the relationship between individuals' perceived capability (perceived behavior control) and their intention to engage in global mobility. Moreover, as similarity attracts individuals (Byrne and Nelson, 1965), we could expect that the stronger the perception of similarity, the stronger the relationship between positive attitude and intention to engage in global mobility, which remains to be proved. Furthermore, previous studies on the intention to expatriate have called for investigating potential boundary conditions by incorporating macro-level variables into the models (e.g., Engle *et al.*, 2015; Richter *et al.*, 2020). Cultural distance, for example, has long been found to negatively relate to individuals' intention to engage in global mobility (Andresen and Margenfeld, 2015; Yurkiewicz and Rosen, 1995), while social support should not be equally available to individuals given the cultural novelty of the prospective environment. Nonetheless, we are unaware of previous research investigating whether cultural distance attenuates the relationship between subjective norms and the intention to engage in GM. Finally, the effect of individuals' intention on their decision to engage in global mobility may also depend on their perceived support from organizations, family, and social networks. While such boundary conditions are of critical consideration, we understand that no research has yet explored that moderating effect in the global mobility decision-making process. Therefore, we incorporated perceived social support and psychic and cultural distance as moderator variables to problematize how (and whether) individuals' decision-making processes vary according to the assignment's factual and perceived contextual aspects.

In this study, we aim to advance our understanding of the motives and socio-cognitive processes that underlie individuals' decisions to engage in global mobility. Our proposed model will likely foster new research that predicts individuals' decision to engage in global mobility and potentially inform managers on how to more successfully intervene at the organizational level to attract globally mobile workers (i.e., by appealing to individuals'

motives to engage in international missions). Countries facing domestic labor shortages and seeking to attract foreign workers can also use our model. For example, the Japanese government has established offices in Brazil to recruit individuals of Japanese descent willing to work in Japan to address the labor shortage (Centro de Informação e Apoio ao Trabalhador no Exterior - CIATE, 2023).

This paper is organized as follows. The following section reviews prior research on individuals' decision to engage in global mobility. Next, the paper introduces the TPB and the SDT, followed by the proposed model of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility and the propositions. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PROPOSITIONS

2.1 A review of prior research on individuals' decision to engage in global mobility

We aim to provide insights into the decision-making process for global mobility. By and large, research investigating GM has focused on understanding the experiences of assigned expatriates, who are employees sent by their companies on extended work assignments in a foreign unit. Assigned expatriates represent diverse expatriates within multinational companies, such as the inpatriates, who are the employees sent from a subsidiary to the corporate headquarter, especially to build and maintain inter-unit relationships (Moeller and Reiche, 2017). The literature evolved to consider a broader range of expatriates, including self-initiated expatriates, who take the initiative to pursue foreign work assignments (Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Assigned expatriates differ from self-initiated expatriates in the extent to which the former receive support from their organizations throughout the process (McNulty and Brewster, 2019). More recently incorporated in the GM field are flexpatriates, who undertake short-term and frequent global assignments, enabling companies to have agile structures and efficient knowledge transfer (Jooss *et al.*, 2021). Flexpatriation is a popular assignment alternative due to its lower cost than traditional assignment and its time-framing that prevents individuals from disrupting their relationships (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, *et al.*, 2004). Recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have also compelled organizations to replace in-person international interactions with online interactions for work purposes. Virtual workers can save costs, reduce

the carbon print and enable individuals to stay in their home community, at the expense of weaker interpersonal relationships with work colleagues (Selmer et al., 2022).

Researchers have examined the determinants of individuals' intention and decision to engage in global mobility for over two decades (Brett and Stroh, 1995; Ipek and Paulus, 2021; Suutari *et al.*, 2012). Most of these studies focus on individuals' intention or willingness to expatriate because there is a difficulty associated with longitudinal data collection among globally mobile workers, especially concerning cost and high dropout rates (Vandor and Franke, 2016). Therefore, studies focusing on the individuals' actual decisions are scarce.

This study focuses on individuals' decision to engage in global mobility and considers intentions as decision antecedents because the decision is based on at least some previous rational consideration (Clarke *et al.*, 2017). Rather than focusing on the intention to expatriate, some of those studies have concentrated on expatriation willingness (e.g., Froese *et al.*, 2013; Mol *et al.*, 2009), which is problematic because willingness is particularly useful for predicting reactive behaviors, while intentions are more appropriate for predicting rational behaviors (Gibbons *et al.*, 1998).

On the decision to engage in GM, the literature identified personal variables, pull and push factors, and psychological variables influencing the decision. Personal characteristics, such as being male, single, and without children, are linked to higher intentions to expatriate (Engle *et al.*, 2015; Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013; Ipek and Paulus, 2021) mainly because these characteristics are linked to contextual aspects that facilitate relocation (i.e., it is easier to move without dependents). Individuals with foreign language proficiency and prior international experience are also more likely to express a higher intention to expatriate (Engle *et al.*, 2015; Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013; Haines *et al.*, 2008), which may be attributed to their access to information and knowledge accumulation.

Researchers have also identified push (e.g., home country's socio-economic conditions) and pull (e.g., host country's standard of living) factors that influence the decision to engage in GM (e.g., McNulty and Vance, 2017; Suutari *et al.*, 2012). Many psychological variables were also found to have a strong association with expatriation intention, such as personal initiative, flexibility (Baluku *et al.*, 2018), cultural intelligence (Richter *et al.*, 2020), as well as personality traits such as openness to experience and extraversion (Mol *et al.*, 2009).

While previous studies help explain the antecedents of individuals' decisions to engage in global mobility, many of these antecedents are beyond the control of companies (i.e., gender and family configurations), and the focus on the intention does not truly represent

how the decision process evolves and which elements have an influence on it. In this regard, other variables need to be considered. The psychological processes operating within individuals are considered a practical level at which people can intervene in human behavior affairs; as such, they enable changing behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Companies and governments can better persuade individuals to engage in global mobility by understanding and appealing to their motivations.

Aiming at providing mechanisms for intervening in individuals' decisions, researchers have focused on socio-cognitive variables and motivations to explain individuals' decisions to engage in global mobility. For instance, career adaptability, measured through four dimensions (concern, confidence, control, and curiosity), was positively related to overseas career intentions (Presbitero and Quita, 2017). Studies applying the TPB showed that the favorable evaluation of the assignment, the perception of competence to undertake it, and the perceived support from family and co-workers helped to explain individuals' expatriation intention (e.g., Engle *et al.*, 2015; Froese *et al.*, 2013; Joardar and Weisang, 2019). Moreover, various autonomous and controlled reasons have been consistently found to influence individuals' intention or decision to engage in global mobility (Madi *et al.*, 2023; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012), even though one exception (Haines *et al.*, 2008) found that extrinsic motivation was not significantly associated with it. It is essential to say that the type of motivation to expatriate also impacts aspects of the assignment itself: individuals with higher intrinsic motivation to expatriate showed more willingness to communicate with people from multicultural and language backgrounds (Haines *et al.*, 2008). Finally, intrinsic and extrinsic motivational cultural intelligence influence individuals' intention to expatriate, which varied according to nationality (Richter *et al.*, 2020).

This background points to the emergence of new forms of globally mobile workers, the difficulties in collecting data to assess individuals' decision to engage in GM (besides their intention), and the fragmented knowledge due to the different lenses used to investigate their intention to engage in GM. We aim to contribute to theory by providing a model to explain the decision to engage in GM relevant to the range of globally mobile workers.

2.2 The model of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility

Acknowledging the value of psychological theories to explain, predict, and change behaviors, several studies have relied on them to investigate individuals' decision to engage in

global mobility. We integrate the TPB and the SDT in this paper to propose a model to predict individuals' decision to engage in global mobility (Figure 1).

We first address aspects of the TPB, based on which we develop propositions 1 and 2. Then, we acknowledge the theoretical boundaries of the TPB and argue for the usefulness of incorporating the variables from the SDT, which leads to proposition 3. Finally, we develop the reasoning to support the investigation of psychic distance, cultural distance, and perceived support as moderator variables in the model.

The TPB is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and explains behaviors that are not entirely voluntary or controlled. The core objective of the TPB is understanding, predicting, and changing intentional human behaviors (Ajzen, 1991), relying on the individuals' systematic and rational use of information (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).

The TPB assumes that behaviors are predicted by intentions, a person's cognitive representation of readiness (the amount of effort one is willing to exert) to perform a behavior or attain a goal (Ajzen, 1985). The mechanism explaining such a relationship is that stronger intentions lead to increased effort to perform the behavior, which also increases the likelihood of performing the behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The relationship between intention and behavior is well-discussed and supported in many research fields (Sheeran, 2002). However, researchers usually take individuals' intentions as proxies of their actual behavior (Frommeyer *et al.*, 2022), mainly due to the difficulties attached to longitudinal studies. Considering all the complexities involved in an expatriation process, we can claim that intentions cannot be used as proxies of actual behavior. However, there is still a rationality and systematicity in how individuals make decisions.

Based on these aspects, the following proposition is developed.

Proposition 1: The higher the individuals' intentions to engage in global mobility, the higher their likelihood of engaging in global mobility.

The TPB uses three socio-cognitive variables to explain intentions. Attitudes are individuals' evaluations of the target behavior and imply the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question (Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norms encompass two aspects: a) individuals' belief that people that are important to them (e.g., managers, family, and friends) would approve and encourage them to undertake

a specific behavior; b) the perception that referent individuals and groups (e.g., peer workers, country fellows) are engaging themselves in the referred behavior. Lastly, perceived behavior control regards individuals' perception of the control and the capability to perform the target behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Previous studies in the GM field have commonly applied the TPB, proving that the psychological variables influence expatriation intention (e.g., Froese *et al.*, 2013; Joardar and Weisang, 2019). However, the results diverge in the predictive power of the three socio-cognitive variables. For instance, Weerasinghe and Kumar (2015) found that only attitudes and self-efficacy thoroughly explained the intention toward an overseas career. Yet, Yurtkoru *et al.* (2017) found that subjective norms and perceived behavioral control but not attitudes predicted the intention to work abroad. Moreover, the studies addressing such relationships mainly were based on student samples (e.g., Engle *et al.*, 2015; Froese *et al.*, 2013), which due to their lack of professional experience, limited our understanding of the phenomenon (Bello *et al.*, 2009), and did not apply domain-specific measures (e.g., assessing perceived behavior control through individuals' general perception of control, rather than the perception toward global mobility) (e.g., Andresen & Margenfeld, 2015; Joardar & Weisang, 2019), which goes contrary to the TPB orientation grounded on the fact that decision-makers demonstrate different information processing in different decision domains (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).

We argue, therefore, that there is still a need to understand the role of socio-cognitive variables in the decision to engage with GM. We expect individuals who believe an assignment could bring personal value and career advances (positive attitude) to be more likely to engage in GM. Moreover, individuals become more comfortable pursuing international assignments as job mobility becomes more popular (Clarke *et al.*, 2017) because there is an increased perception that more individuals engage in job mobility, a source of social support. Thus, amidst the popularity of global mobility, individuals' subjective norms should inform the intention to engage in GM. Finally, individuals to whom assignments are offered tend to present high cognitive certainty (self-confidence) leading to their intention to engage in global mobility because they believe in having been chosen based on their previous success (Haslberger *et al.*, 2013). These arguments lead to the following proposition:

Proposition 2: The more favorable the individuals' attitude toward global mobility (a), the perceived behavior control regarding global mobility (b), and the subjective norms regarding global mobility (c), the stronger their intention to engage in global mobility.

Despite the promising results, the TPB does not address the question of why the psychological variables in the model motivate behaviors (Chatzisarantis *et al.*, 1997) because it ignores the organisms' conditions that make activities and behaviors desired (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The TPB does not provide information on the origins of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. In fact, most socio-cognitive models do not address the central matters of the self-determination theory: it identifies the motivational conditions associated with individuals' behaviors (Andersen *et al.*, 2000). This per se complements the literature in TPB, offering more value for organizational research to understand the role different types of motivation play in individuals' decision to engage in global mobility. However, SDT does not reveal the process by which motivations lead to behavioral intentions and behaviors: it does not provide an understanding of how individuals make sense of their motivations and translate them into their decision to engage in global mobility. Therefore, taken separately, the TPB and the SDT provide an incomplete explanation of the decision-making process to engage in global mobility. Thus, faced with the theoretical scope and boundaries of the TPB and the SDT, we integrate both theories to provide a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' decisions to engage in global mobility.

The SDT is a multidimensional framework that emphasizes the qualitative aspects of motivation, highlighting that different types and sources of motivation lead to behaviors with varying quality, persistency, and dynamics (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2017). Motivation means to be moved to act and all motivated behaviors are accompanied by a sense of why one is performing the behavior (Sheldon *et al.*, 2017). People may have several reasons for engaging in one behavior, which are the basis for distinguishing the types of motivation, autonomous or controlled (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000). Individuals are self-determined or autonomously motivated when they engage in an activity volitionally - out of interest, because the activity is enjoyable, or because one's values the behavior. On the other hand, individuals present controlled motivation when they engage in activities out of pressure, which can come from inside sources, such as when individuals perform something because they feel guilt and shame or from outside sources, such as promised rewards and punishments.

In organizational research, autonomous motivation has been found to enhance job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Gagné *et al.*, 2010; Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2013) and predict self-initiated expatriates' organizational and community embeddedness (Chen and Shaffer, 2017), while diminishing maladaptive outcomes such as turnover intentions and psychological distress (Gagné *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the harder the task, the more important the quality of the motivation (Green-Demers *et al.*, 1997), which is why

autonomous motivation appears to be critical when greater effort or persistence is required to perform a behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In contrast, although controlled motivation is also powerful and can be linked to efficiency, it tends to be associated with less free-choice persistence (Ryan *et al.*, 1991), increased workers' turnover intentions (Güntert, 2015), and lower levels of individuals' well-being (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2013).

In the expatriation field, autonomous and controlled motivations are essential predictors of individuals' engagement in GM (Haines *et al.*, 2008; Madi *et al.*, 2023; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). However, there is evidence that this relationship is not direct and can be better understood from a chain of relationships to which the TPB can contribute; such evidence comes from the theoretical reasoning supporting the TPB and the SDT and empirical findings. For example, previous studies found a direct effect of the socio-cognitive variables from the TPB and the intention to engage in GM (detailed in proposition 2), and the types of motivation clarify the origins of the TPB's constructs because individuals align their beliefs with their motives to pursue need-satisfying behaviors (Andersen *et al.*, 2000; Chan *et al.*, 2020). Complementary, according to the TPB's sufficiency assumption, the effect of any outside-model variable on intentions (i.e., motivations) should be mediated by the theory's three major predictors (i.e., attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavior control) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010). Taken together, these aspects suggest that the cognitive processing of the available information may play an important role in explaining how individuals' motivations influence their intention to engage in GM.

Based on this theoretical reasoning, the mediation through the socio-cognitive variables means that the motivations to engage in global mobility (e.g., cultural intelligence, professional development) need some cognitive processing (e.g., Do I have the necessary skills to interact with foreigners?) to influence individuals' intention to engage in global mobility. In other words, motives are necessary but not sufficient (Richter and Hauff, 2022) to lead to individuals' intentions and, ultimately, the decision to engage in global mobility.

This mediation effect is consistent with the assertions of the TPB and SDT. Deci and Ryan (1985) pointed out that socio-cognitive theories can be combined with constructs from SDT to form a "more complete motivational theory" (p. 229) and Ajzen has noted that the TPB is open to including additional predictors if they capture a significant variance in intention or behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

This mediation mechanism was supported in other research fields. For example, Luqman *et al.* (2018) revealed that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control fully mediated the relationships between motivation (autonomous and controlled) and

discontinuance intention of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and WeChat). This mediation effect has yet to be tested in the GM context. Thus, based on this theoretical and empirical reasoning, we developed the following proposition:

Proposition 3: Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control mediate the stimulus of autonomous and controlled motivation on intention to engage in global mobility.

These previous propositions establish the sequential way the constructs from the SDT are expected to influence those from the TPB. However, integrating those two theories may not entirely explain the decisions to engage in GM. Other variables that address the context in different ways, such as psychic distance, cultural distance, and perceived support, may play a role in influencing individuals' decisions to engage in global mobility.

Psychic distance involves the notion of perception (Sousa and Bradley, 2006). It regards the degree to which employees perceive their assignment environment as different from or similar to their country of nationality concerning aspects such as language, culture, and political system (Vromans *et al.*, 2013). In the proposed model, we expect psychic distance to moderate the relationships that involve measures directly linked to individuals' assessments: their perception of their ability to expatriate and their "personal" desirability of the assignment (i.e., PBC and attitude).

Borrowing the insights from the social psychology literature, such as the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne & Nelson, 1965), we can assume that individuals have more favorable evaluations and are more attracted to perceived similar environments than to perceived dissimilar ones. The individuals' attraction to environments toward which they perceive small psychic distance is elucidated through a quotation of an Indian expatriate in London: "(t)here is so much in common with UK and India in terms of language, the laws, regulations, the culture to an extent, the educational system it makes life emotionally easy" (Dickmann, 2012, p. 793). Thus, the higher the perception of similarity between home and host environment, the stronger the relationship between their positive attitude and intention to engage in global mobility. Based on this theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence, we expect that:

Proposition 4a: The relationship between attitude and intention to engage in global mobility is stronger (weaker) when psychic distance is low (high).

Moreover, the perception of differences between home and host environments reflects on individuals' anticipation of adjustment difficulty and lack of confidence in their ability to master both living and working in the assignment environment (Tharenou, 2008).

Consequently, the positive relationship between PBC and intention to engage in global mobility should be attenuated as the psychic distance increases because people are less likely to perceive they have the appropriate knowledge to understand and adapt to the assignment environment.

Proposition 4b: The relationship between perceived behavior control and intention to engage in global mobility is stronger (weaker) when psychic distance is low (high).

Further to the perception of differences between home and host environments, there is also the notion of national culture. Studies associate culture with many social-life aspects, such as family, workplace, and state (Hofstede *et al.*, 1991). In this study, culture is understood as the outcome of a particular historical and sociological development that creates national behavior patterns among individuals. In studying GM, both the home and host environments' national cultures matter: cultural distance is the degree to which cultural norms in one environment differ from those in another (Hennart and Larimo, 1998).

Commonalities in values and norms (denoting small cultural distances) facilitate human interaction and communication between people by providing a common understanding of contexts and behaviors expectations (Håkanson and Ambos, 2010). Expatriate research, however, consistently supports that the larger the cultural distance between home and host countries, the more challenging the assignment (Black *et al.*, 1991; Bozionelos, 2009) due to the greater uncertainty involved (Dupuis *et al.*, 2008). A high cultural distance is attached to considerable disruption to people's way of living, and it seems to play an important role in understanding the impact of socio-cognitive variables on employees' intention to engage in global mobility, the reasoning for which is now addressed.

Cross-cultural theorists assert that entrance (physically or virtually) into unfamiliar cultures produces a loss in an individual's well-being, and the ambiguity of an unfamiliar environment is often associated with stress (Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005). Conversely, low cultural distance helps social interactions (Peltokorpi and Zhang, 2022) and facilitates harmonious relationships (Zhang and Harzing, 2016). We acknowledge that cultural distance may also influence decision-making for virtual assignees because technology-mediated work practices do not overcome the boundaries related to cultural and linguistic differences

between individuals' home base and the national culture where the corporation is located as they interact (Selmer *et al.*, 2022). Although virtual assignees may be less exposed to distant cultural elements outside work activities, they will still face cultural challenges to understand the company's culture and norms and virtually interact with co-workers.

Despite the well-documented impact of cultural distance on individuals' experiences abroad, we ascertain that cultural distance may also impact individuals' decisions to engage in GM through a less-appreciated mechanism. To explain this mechanism, we take the example of the power distance cultural dimension: it has widespread consequences in daily lives, recognized from the accepted inequality, especially regarding wealth, class, and age. The societies' characteristics reflecting power distance are easily captured even through mainstream media and can be shocking and confusing for those coming from places on opposite sides of the power distance scale. Thus, in possession of shocking or confusing information (that is culturally grounded, even though people are not cognizant of this) from the assignment environment, important others are more likely to oppose mobility. Consequently, the positive relationship between subjective norms and intention to engage in GM should be attenuated as the cultural distance increases because people are less likely to perceive social support when deciding whether to engage in GM with high cultural distance. In this regard, whereas empirical studies based on the TPB have found that subjective norm is positively related to the intention to expatriate, this impact is likely to vary across the levels of cultural distance. This has not yet been considered by the literature. Therefore, we proposed the following proposition:

Proposition 5: Cultural distance will attenuate the positive relationship between subjective norms and the intention to engage in global mobility.

We acknowledge, however, that even when individuals present high intention to engage in GM, their readiness to expatriate may not reflect on the actual relocation due to the lack of support they receive from relevant stakeholders. Depending on the type of assignment, different stakeholders may play a role in individuals' decision to engage in global work.

In the case of assigned expatriates, for instance, the perception of support from home and host organizations (Chen and Shaffer, 2017) may interfere with the relationship between the intention and the decision to engage in GM. Individuals expatriated through companies may expect organizational support to compensate them for the time away from their home country and ease the adjustment to the community and workplace (Kraimer and Wayne,

2004). Important to all in-person globally mobile workers is the family influence on their decision to engage in GM (Hippler, 2009). The perceived support from spouse, parents, and extended family may help clarify under which circumstances individuals' intentions to expatriate are transformed into actual relocation. Further, the perceived support from social ties may also contribute to the decision to engage in GM. Country fellows are considered magnets to specific assignments because networks of ethnic linkages positively affect prospective workers' decisions (Bredtmann *et al.*, 2020). Overall, ethnic networks provide information and support on the entire assignment process, critical to transforming individuals' intentions into actual decisions to engage in GM. For virtual assignees, friends or colleagues with virtual expatriation experience may provide the necessary support, positively influencing their decision to engage in virtual global mobility.

The higher the perceived support from the different stakeholders, the higher the likelihood that individuals' intentions will translate into their actual engagement in GM. On the other hand, a high intent to engage in GM may result in the decision not to engage in global mobility if there is a lack of perceived support. Thus, we proposed the following proposition:

Proposition 6: Perceived support from the organization, family, and social networks will enhance the relationship between the intention to engage in global mobility and the decision to engage in global mobility.

These six propositions establish the relationships among the variables in our conceptual model of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility (Figure 1).

We now discuss the model, its contributions, and perspectives for further research.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

3.1 Discussion

Previous studies have approached expatriation intention and decision from various perspectives. Some studies relied on the SDT (e.g., Haines *et al.*, 2008; Madi *et al.*, 2023) to explain individuals' intention to expatriate and found that diverse autonomous and controlled reasons positively impact individuals' intention to engage in GM. We understood that intention is more complex and nuanced to be explained and depends on socio-cognitive

variables. Therefore, the model we proposed in this study is more likely to depict how the types of motivation are linked to intention because the motivations need some cognitive effort to materialize in intentional behaviors.

We also acknowledged that a significant number of studies empirically investigated expatriation intention or decision exclusively through the TPB lenses (e.g., Engle *et al.*, 2015, p. 201; Froese *et al.*, 2013; Joardar and Weisang, 2019). These studies found that attitudes, SN and PBC helped explain individuals' intention to engage in global mobility, with variations concerning the importance of each construct: some constructs eventually did not explain expatriation intention (e.g., attitude and subjective norms significantly influenced intention, but PBC did not affect it (Andresen and Margenfeld, 2015). Recognizing the relevance of the TPB to explaining human behaviors, we explored the expatriation literature to identify possible boundary conditions that could render the relationships among the TPB variables weaker or stronger. Therefore, we incorporated psychic and cultural distance as moderator variables of the relationship between the socio-cognitive variables and the intention to engage in GM and perceived support as a moderator variable between the intention to engage in GM and the actual decision. Compared to previous research that used the TPB to explain individuals' intention to engage in GM, we are bringing contextual information into the model expected better to capture the relationship between the TPB's variables when explaining individuals' decision to engage in global mobility.

In summary, these aspects highlight how our model is built upon and compares with previous studies. Next, we explore how it contributes to theory.

3.2 Theoretical contributions

We propose a model to explain individuals' decision to engage in global mobility. Previous research on individuals' decisions to engage in GM focused on more traditional types of expatriates (e.g., Dickmann *et al.*, 2008) and, at most, self-initiated expatriates (e.g., Despotovic *et al.*, 2022) or immigrants (e.g., Cerdin *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the decision to engage in GM is a common issue for global employees or workers considering an international career or an experience abroad. In this regard, we contribute to the GM literature by extending the scope of previous studies and proposing a conceptual paper to explain the decision process individuals go through when deciding to engage in GM for a broad range of employees, from the most traditional expatriates to the

least investigated or newest phenomena of flexible global work arrangements (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, *et al.*, 2004) and virtual global mobility (Selmer *et al.*, 2022).

Our proposed model to explain individuals' decision to engage in GM combines theoretical perspectives and variables not integrated before in the research field. Crucially, theoretical insights come from demonstrating how the integration of variables alters the understanding of the phenomena by reorganizing the causal maps (Whetten, 1989). Thus, it is essential to note that adding SDT to the TPB-based models allows us to account for motivation quality. It is important as it provides the source of information (autonomous or controlled) individuals use in their decision-making to engage in GM, contributing to better predicting it. This addresses another shortfall in the field: the deficiency in jointly considering the motivational and cognitive aspects concerning the decision-making process for engaging in GM.

We argue that the TPB and the SDT incorporate variables that, together, explain the psychological process of engaging in GM more comprehensively and with better predictive power than previous models and can help companies and individuals better assess their chances to succeed. We acknowledge that contextual aspects may impact this process and incorporated moderating variables that had not been fully explored in previous models on individuals' decisions to engage in GM. For example, we contend that individuals' intentions will translate into their decision to engage in GM provided they perceive support from family, company, or friends. We also incorporate the context into the model through the psychic distance: the perceived differences between home and host environments will inhibit individuals' attitudes and perceived control and capability to inform their intention to engage in GM. Finally, the objective cultural differences between home and host environments should attenuate the relationship between subjective norms and the intention to engage in global mobility. We claim that the decision process to engage in GM is multilayered and complex, involving micro and macro elements. Therefore, our model also considers the importance of contextual nuances to the psychological process involved in the decision-making to engage in global mobility.

After testing, our model should provide new insights into the relationship between the variables from SDT and TPB. Previous studies in other research areas have already combined SDT and TPB for their complementary explanation of the motivational process preceding actions. Those studies have found that the socio-cognitive variables mediate the relationship between the types of motivation and behavioral intention (e.g., Lee *et al.*, 2020; Luqman *et al.*, 2018). Understanding if this same pattern holds in the GM is of importance as it will help

verify the psychological pathways involved in individuals' decision to engage in GM. More precisely, if this pattern holds, it proves that individuals' motivations require cognitive processing to inform expatriation intentions and decisions. On the other hand, if the mediation does not hold in the context of GM, it means that the socio-cognitive variables are not enough to explain the effect of the types of motivation on individuals' intention to engage in GM and that both can independently impact the intentions to engage in global mobility.

Further, examining the proposed moderating variables would complement previous studies that used the TPB to explain individuals' intention to expatriate (Engle *et al.*, 2015; Froese *et al.*, 2013; Remhof *et al.*, 2014; Yurtkoru *et al.*, 2017). For example, previous studies present mixed results on the influence of the three socio-cognitive variables in predicting the intention to expatriate (e.g., Engle *et al.*, 2015; Remhof *et al.*, 2014; Yurtkoru *et al.*, 2017). Investigating the moderating variables in these relationships would allow a better understanding of how (and whether) individuals' decision-making processes vary according to the assignment's factual and perceived contextual aspects, providing a more comprehensive answer for the field.

3.3 Managerial relevance

Our proposed model offers practical suggestions for handling the critical organizational challenge of attracting globally mobile workers. Understanding the psychological process behind individuals' decision to engage in international assignments can provide insights into motives and socio-cognitive aspects that organizations and governments can focus on to attract a global workforce. Suppose individuals' perceived behavior control influences their intention to engage in GM. In that case, organizations can implement practices to enhance their perceived capability and attract a diverse range of global workers. For instance, cross-cultural and language training can improve individuals' self-efficacy and enable them to perform effectively in in-person and virtual cross-cultural settings (Johnson *et al.*, 2006). The same can be said about cross-cultural training. Enhancing cultural intelligence can facilitate effectively adapting to new face-to-face or virtual cultural contexts (Presbitero, 2017), which can help with the decision-making process and the success of assignments. Most international work arrangements also benefit from cross-cultural training (Conroy *et al.*, 2018), which should be tailored according to its specificities (i.e., short notice given upon departure and short periods spent on assignments), focusing on compact seminars on specific cultural differences.

Considering how autonomous and controlled motivations differ in terms of behavior quality and persistence (Ryan *et al.*, 1991; Ryan and Deci, 2017), it is essential to understand their role in predicting individuals' decision to engage in GM to develop better practices to support them during the assignment. For example, if the decision to engage in GM is more informed by autonomous motivations, individuals are more likely to remain motivated during the IA. In this case, companies would not need to spend much on assistance during the assignment. On the other hand, if it is found to be controlled-motivated, individuals will be more likely to lose their motivation earlier, feel less satisfied, and have higher turnover intention since extrinsically motivated individuals tend to perceive more difficulties during the assignment (Haines *et al.*, 2008). In this case, to keep GM workers motivated, companies should invest more into assisting them during the assignment, for instance, by providing continued financial incentives.

Overall, by understanding the individuals' psychological processes and acting accordingly, organizations can successfully attract globally mobile workers and ensure workers will be motivated during the assignment avoiding all the costs associated with early returns and turnover.

3.4 Avenues for future research

The model presented in this study seeks to explain the psychological process leading to individuals' decision to engage in GM or not. The propositions of this model remain subject to empirical testing through quantitative studies. Thus, the next step may be to apply and extend it to explore more antecedents and boundary conditions.

Future studies empirically testing the model should follow the guidelines Tharenou (2015) recommended to ensure rigorous methodological approaches. In this regard, referring to research design, attitudes, SN, PBC, and intention to expatriate can be assessed through validated scales (Eby & Russell, 2000; Froese *et al.*, 2013; Gagné *et al.*, 2010; Joardar & Weisang, 2019). To assess the individuals' motivations to expatriate, researchers can use adapted items from validated scales (e.g., Grant & Berry, 2011; Sheldon, Osin, Gordeeva, Suchkov, & Sychev, 2017; Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2013) based on the rich literature investigating the reasons individuals' expatriate (e.g., Hippler, 2009; Shortland, 2016; Stahl *et al.*, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). The moderating constructs also have existing measures. For example, the CD can be assessed through the Kogut and Singh (1988) index based on either Hofstede (1980), Schwartz (Schwartz, 1994, 1999), or Globe (House *et al.*, 2004). Even

choosing one of these, there is more than one way to operationalize CD. For example, if one chooses the cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede, one could use the composite measure or calculate separate estimates of each of the five dimensions (Shenkar, 2012). Further, authors can assess PD using the scale proposed by Sousa and Bradley (2006).

The model is suitable for explaining the decision-making process for the diverse types of globally mobile workers. This approach follows well-accepted models in the field of GM that aim to explain aspects that are common for the range of globally mobile workers (e.g., Fan *et al.*, 2023). Nonetheless, the importance of the variables and the relationships between the model's variables can vary according to the types of workers in the samples. Therefore, researchers need to consider the specificities of their samples to choose the measurement scales and to interpret the findings. If we consider the perceived support variable, different stakeholders may play a role in individuals' decisions, depending on the type of assignment. For example, organizational support may play a crucial role for assigned expatriates. Still, it may not be as influential for self-initiated expatriates, for whom country fellows in the host country may become critical (Bredtmann *et al.*, 2020). A similar rationale can be claimed for virtual assignees - family support may not be as relevant as it is for traditional and self-initiated expatriates, when there are almost inevitable family concerns and disruptions (Tharenou, 2008). Conversely, other stakeholders may influence their decision: friends or colleagues with virtual expatriation experience may provide the necessary support, influencing their decision to engage in virtual global mobility.

We assert that the model should be replicated in various national settings to capture the contribution and influence of local characteristics on the proposed relationships. It is reasonable to expect different results depending on the individual's nationality because national-level characteristics, such as cultural frameworks and economic development, may affect both the motivation and the socio-cognitive variables (Ryan and Deci, 2017; Triandis, 1989; Witt and Redding, 2009). For instance, studies support the role of cultural constraints on people's cognition: people from collectivistic cultures are more attentive to social norms (i.e., subjective norms), while people from individualistic cultures put more emphasis on personal evaluations (i.e., attitudes and PBC) (Shukri *et al.*, 2016). In the context of expatriation, cultural norms appear to affect how international experiences are valued (attitude) in different countries (Mello *et al.*, 2022), and the culture of origin is said to influence a person's international mobility readiness (Andresen and Margenfeld, 2015). Thus, comparing samples from different cultural clusters is a potentially rewarding avenue for further research as it can provide information regarding the idiosyncratic (relationships that

vary across the samples) and contextual explanations (associations that are generalized across samples) of the phenomena (Tsui, 2007).

Moreover, the proposed model focused on the psychological variables that affect individuals' decision to engage or not in global mobility because they are the most practical level at which people can intervene in human behavior affairs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Organizations' support systems and career management practices (Dickmann *et al.*, 2008; Joardar and Weisang, 2019), however, may also influence individuals' motivations, attitudes, and their actual relocation. In this regard, future studies could identify and incorporate theoretically driven organizational-level variables to elucidate the influence chain leading to individuals' decision-making to engage in GM.

Last, the integrated model of SDT and TPB has been primarily used in health-related research, but it could be applied to other fields that use TPB-only models. This would add to our understanding of whether the integrated model enables better explanations of organizational phenomena than TPB-only models in areas such as unethical behavior (e.g., Lin *et al.*, 2018) and hiring (e.g., Araten-Bergman, 2016).

Our model in this article unifies fragmented literature on the antecedents of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility. Further, the model provides an important starting point for developing more sophisticated models and paves the way for empirical research. Such research potentially benefits both the individuals engaging in GM, who could have their needs and expectations better addressed in GM, and the companies, which could be more assertive in attracting and managing an international workforce. Thus, we hope this new model of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility will inspire scholars and practitioners to further investigate this area of inquiry and apply it to other research fields.

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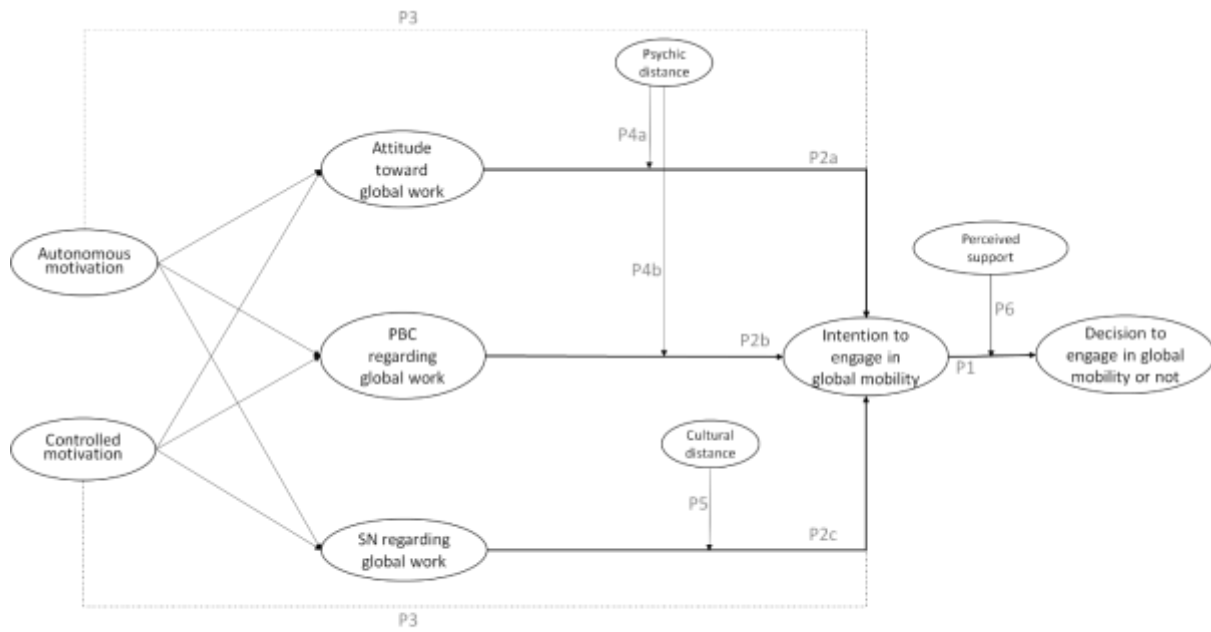


Figure 1: Conceptual model of individuals' decision to engage in global mobility

Source(s): Authors work



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