



Explaining consumer waste separation behaviour

By Miriam Scheffer

Background

On 10 February 2020 a news article was published in the Netherlands stating that 85 million recyclable coffee cups used by the Dutch government were burned instead of recycled (NOS, 2020). This was caused by the careless separation of the cups from other types of waste, which made it impossible for the recycling firm to save the materials. This article exemplifies the importance and relevance of careful waste separation.

Objective

The goal of this research is to determine the explanation of consumer waste separation behaviour and provide recommendations for practitioners as well as opportunities for further research to address the problem of poor waste separation. I aim to provide an answer to the following research question: *How can current consumer waste separation behaviour be explained?*

Introduction

While many researchers have addressed the issue, the explanation of current waste separation behaviour remains unclear. Some previous findings are even contradictory.

Theory

In the theory section previous research is discussed, with an emphasis on two well-known models: the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) and the norm activation model. The TPB focuses more on a person's behaviour stemming from personal expectancy and benefits, while the norm activation model concentrates on a person's behaviour stemming from moral and altruistic beliefs. Both models aim to explain a person's behaviour and are claimed to be applicable in the environmental field. Park and Ha (2014) explored several psychological variables relevant to the intention to recycle by combining the two models. Their research resulted in the model displayed in figure 1

Theory

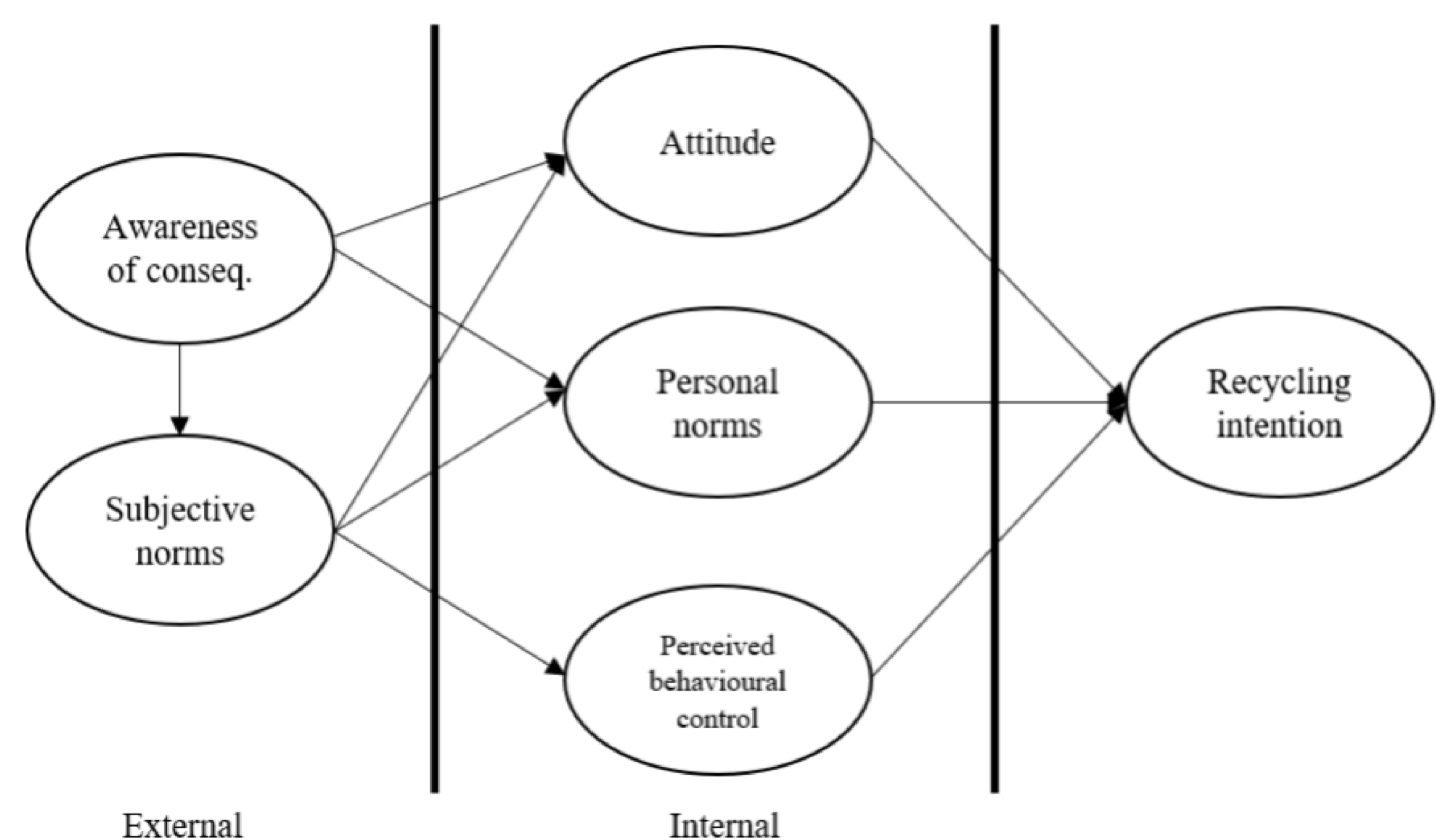


Figure 1 – TPB & NAM combined

Method

Data is obtained through the use of 9 semi-structured interviews. A selection of 9 experts in the field of waste separation has been made. Waste separation is a complex environmental issue and thus it is important to take into account different types of knowledge. Therefore, special attention was put into creating a diverse sample of people in different types of organizations as well as on different levels within the organizations

Conclusions

the TPB seems to capture the largest part of the explanation of current waste separation behaviour. The norm activation model and TPB can be supplanted by recent research into environmental 21 concern, knowledge and complexity. However, an overarching variable relating to multiple factors remains missing: communication. Communication relates to all factors of both TPB and the norm activation model, but by excluding it from the models it can easily be overlooked. By focusing on improving communication, it might be possible to improve the other relevant factors too, creating a chain reaction. Further research into waste separation behaviour should include communication as an important variable in their models.