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**Exploring the Link between Intention
and Behavior in Consumer Research**

Mădălina Bălău¹

Abstract: In the attempts to predict or influence a change in consumer behavior, intention represents one important element and it is considered a close proxy to the behavior itself. However, there are several perspectives on the role of intention on subsequent behavior; the objective of this article is to review several perspectives on this role, starting from models frequently used in consumer research and enriching the perspectives by discussing the influence of implementation intention and the effect of intent measurement on product and brand actual buying behavior. The main findings are that intention is most frequently used in research as a stable concept in the mind of the consumers quite easy to measure, yet other perspectives suggest that intention could easily change according to the context or even under the influence of the measurement process. These competing perspectives need further exploration since the gap between behavior predicted on intentions and actual behavior is still important. The current article contributes to the literature on the conceptualization and measurement of intention and its main implications consist of insights for using the concept of intention in marketing and consumer research aimed at predicting or changing behavior.

Keywords: intention-behavior link; consumer behavior; theory of planned behavior; implementation intentions

JEL Classification: M30; M31; M39

1. Introduction

Explaining consumer behavior is a first step to being able to predict it or change it. For most types of interventions, whether we speak of marketing activity aimed at influencing consumers to buy new products or services, or of changing certain kinds of social behaviors, like reducing aggressive behavior of children in schools, the actors involved would like to know what determinants have most impact as to leverage them. Today most behaviors also involve consumption behaviors, understood as buying, using and also disposing off products. Some researchers link behavior to general attitudes of personality traits of individuals, yet these factors only influence behavior indirectly. (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) Factors closer to the context and the behavior itself were considered to be better proxies for explaining and predicting it, such is the case for the construct of intention.

The information about consumers' intentions is often used by companies in predicting their future marketing actions. In launching new products, firms frequently base their decisions on measured purchase intentions. However, it was observed by various researchers (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2010) that certain kinds of intentions seldom lead to the actual enacting of the behavior: it is the situation of purchasing ethical products or of practicing health

¹ Senior Lecturer, PhD, DiSEDD Research Center, Danubius University of Galati, Romania. Address: 3 Galati Blvd., 800654 Galati, Romania. Tel.: +40.733.180.384, Corresponding author: madalina.balau@univ-danubius.ro.

promoting behaviors, such as reducing the sugar intake, exercising, eating fresh and seasonal food. Under these conditions, it is obvious that a good understanding of the way intentions function in relation to subsequent behavior may have a positive impact on company's actions. The aim of this article is to explore the multiple facets of intention found in the literature. On the one hand, we present the theories that view the concept of intention as a stable and reliable aspect in the mind ready to be measured and try to understand how well these models succeed to predict behavior, what are the variables that were found to moderate the link between intention and behavior and the main direct influences on intention. On the other hand, we could find studies that conceive intention as a mental strategy which is highly dependent of context. Under this perspective, intention isn't a stable variable ready to be measured, but a very flexible one. This second perspective was less explored in research and would deserve more attention as a possible tool that could be better used by consumers in performing the desired behaviors, since it is quite frequently observed that individuals have sometimes difficulties with 'walking their talk' for non-routine behaviors.

2. The Link between Intention and Behavior under the Theory of Planned Behavior

The intention construct is a central factor for the Theory of Reasoned Action as well as for the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which is a development of the first theory that refers to behaviors outside the volitional control. These two models are well appreciated in the literature and have a great influence in studying and explaining consumer decisions as they were the first to offer a coherent structure that linked attitudes to behavior (i.e., thoughts and action). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) assert that intentions will indicate the effort the individual will exert in performing the behavior and the willingness of trying to enact it. Thus, the stronger is the intention of an individual, the higher the probability of implementing that behavior. However, Ajzen (1990) noted that this direct relationship works only for behaviors under volitional control, meaning that the individual in question is the one deciding to perform or not that behavior. For behaviors outside volitional control there is another variable that influences directly the behavior, namely the behavioral control. Under the Theory of Planned Behavior, it is expected that an individual will implement a behavior if he/she is motivated, so if he/she has the intention, and also has the necessary ability to enact that behavior. This ability of an individual to perform a certain behavior has an important subjective dimension, which is the individual's own perception of control over performing the behavior. Ajzen (1988) uses this construct in the Theory of Planned Behavior and names it Perceived Behavioral Control, which influences the intention as well as the implementation of behavior.

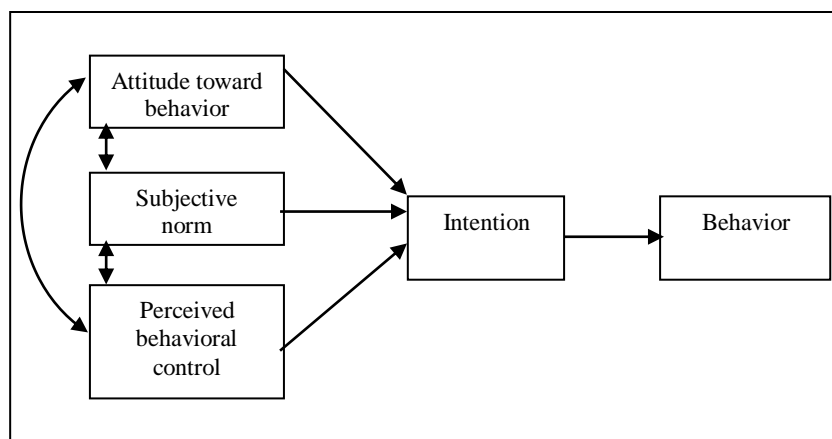


Figure 1. The Theory of Planned Behavior illustrated by Ajzen (1991)

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) presents the determinants of individual decision to do a certain behavior and intention is represented as the individual's motivation to exert effort in that direction. Under the TPB, behavior is determined by intention and perceived control, which is the capability of the individual to enact that behavior. Intention is predicted by attitudes, subjective norm, which captures the individual interpretation of the social pressures related to that behavior, and also the perceived behavioral control which also interacts with intention in further predicting behavior.

In the practice of measurement of intention in order to predict subsequent behavior things aren't always that straightforward. Usually, performing a certain behavior involves choosing one course of action among multiple alternative courses of action. Moreover, sometime the intention measurement cannot take place close to the moment of performance of the behavior, so various factors may intervene between this measurement and the enactment of the behavior. These issues reduce the predictive ability of the theories mentioned above. As well, for understanding and predicting behavior change, it is worth noting that most relevant behaviors are those that involve quite a high degree of uncertainty around the possibility of implementing that behavior.

Sheppard and his colleagues (Shepperd, Hartwick & Warshaw, 1988) proposed a solution for the development of these theories which could incorporate also the diverse invisible factors that may intervene between intention measurement and behavior performance under more or less uncertainty, namely the of "subjective behavioral estimation". Using a meta-analysis to understand the influence of behavioral estimation on the predicted behavior through the model of reasoned action, Sheppard et al. (1988) found that the correlation between intention and behavior presented a higher variance depending on the study context. This suggests the presence of moderators and in this situation the behavioral estimation presented a higher correlation to the behavior and a smaller variance. Moreover, the use of behavioral estimation within the model of reasoned action to predict goals rather than behaviors increased the model's predictive capacity. An important finding of their meta-analysis was that when choice was made salient by the presence of alternatives, the model of reasoned action performed better. A possible explanation offered by Sheppard et al. (1988) was that the choice context elicited a greater involvement on the behalf of the subjects.

Although the TPB model is frequently used to explain and predict behavioral decisions, it has several shortcomings: it only includes "proximal determinants of behavior", as Conner and Armitage (1998) suggest, rather than a complete theory of behavior as Ajzen (1991) suggest; and it has been tested mainly under correlational designs, although the model is supposed to present a causal sequence.

In addition to the constructs in the TPB model, Conner and Armitage (1998) found that past behavior has an important contribution in predicting intention and behavior, with TPB variables already present in the model. Aarts, Verplanken and van Knippenberg (1998) argue that past behavior is a moderator for the relationship between intention and behavior, especially for habitual type of behaviors where the cognitions proposed by TPB play a smaller predicting role. The habitual behavior is an interesting type of behavior since it is triggered automatically by context and the specific situation.

Another important aspect influencing intention is the self-identity concept, which is defined as "the salient part of an actor's self which relates to a particular behavior". (Conner & Armitage, 1998, p. 1444) Charng et al. (1988) suggest that intentions are determined by salient role identities, which will increasingly predict repeated behaviors that make that role identity (or self-identity) more salient. There is also another interpretation proposed by DeBono and Snyder (1995), who argue that people feel the need to maintain their self-identity and that they seek situations according to their attitudes and not necessarily deliberating on attitudes with no choice over the situation.

Fazio (1990) proposed that attitudes influence behavior in two ways, depending on the presence or lack of motivation and opportunities for that behavior. In case the person is motivated and has opportunities, intentions will be formed and a plan for putting them into practice will be conceived. However, if motivation or opportunities lack, attitudes will impact behavior spontaneously, when they will be activated by the presence of the attitude object. The MODE model of Fazio (1990) proposes that attitudes are latent, but when automatically activated by cues, they will shape the perception of the individual on the context, through a selective perception.

When testing the TPB model and the link between intention and behavior, results indicated a less strong relation, and also a more distant one. (Godin & Kok, 1996; Bagozzi, 1992; Conner & Armitage, 1998) The critics of TPB distinguished two processes involved in forming an intention and consequently in implementing it. Kuhl and Beckman (1985) argue that there is a motivational process which leads to making a decision, thus resulting in intention formation, and then, a volitional process that leads to intention implementation.

Gollwitzer (1990) argued that in case of goal intentions, individuals follow a two-stage process, the first part identical to the TPB model proposed by Ajzen, while the second consists of forming plans which are implemented as soon as the environmental conditions support that action. These plans developed in the second stage are named by Gollwitzer (1993) ‘implementation intentions’ which have greater chances of being performed than the goal intentions which may result from the TPB deliberative process.

3. The “Implementation Intention” Concept

The concept of implementation intention is reported to be closely linked to the performance of the behavior and it deserves a more detailed presentation. First, there needs to be made a distinction between goal intentions and implementation intentions. Goal intentions refer to achieving a certain outcome or performing a certain behavior desired by the individual. However, pursuing a goal to implementation is not an easy task outside the routine behaviors, so for this individuals need to be capable of noticing the opportunities that would enable the goal implementation. The implementation intentions are a tactic to achieving the goal intention, by mentally programming “the when, where and how of goal-directed responses”. (Brandstatter, Lengfelder & Gollwitzer, 2001, p. 947) Thus, the implementation intention is a powerful self-regulatory strategy that creates a mental link between a specific future situation and the intended goal directed response.

The implementation intention functions as a concession of control to environmental cues, which activates an automatic initiation of the intended behavior without deliberating or forming again a conscious intent. Thus, the implementation intention may be a tactic used effectively when the goal-directed behavior would be otherwise forgotten. In their studies, Gollwitzer and Brandstatter (1997) tested the implementation of goal intentions with and without forming implementation intentions and the first condition yielded a higher goal achievement rate.

Brandstatter, Lengfelder and Gollwitzer (2001) report the results of four experimental studies that explored the functioning of implementation intentions for participants in different conditions: university students, opiate addicts under withdrawal and schizophrenic patients. Their main findings are that the implementation intentions delegate control to situational cues, which further automatically activate the behavior, and they enables accelerated behavioral responses even for individuals that were under a high cognitive load (the opiate addicts), involving an efficient facilitation of behavior. The

experiments with university students revealed that using implementation intentions does not increase the response speed on the expense of other tasks, but they yield a faster reaction only on the task for which the implementation intention was formed. Thus, it reduces the mental stress related to that task performance.

Implementation intentions and habit may seem alike through the automatization feature, yet the most important difference is that implementation intentions are a mental link between a goal and an anticipated situation, while habits become automatic through the frequency and consistency of the behavior.

Brandstatter, Lengfelder and Gollwitzer (2001) note that the implementation intention is a mental tool that facilitates action and its effect lasts only as long as the person holds that implementation intention. Moreover, this tool seems to function markedly better when difficulties in the goal-directed behavior are present. An explanation might also come from the fact that it activates an action orientation which prevents questioning the goals, so it reduces hesitation. The implementation intentions don't lead to a greater rigidity towards the context either, as it enables action initiation with few cognitive resources that allow the individual to notice actively alternative opportunities of action.

4. Challenges in Measuring Intentions and Their Effects

In the literature there is a well-documented gap between the consumers' self-reported intentions and their actual behavior. (Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2010) Some scholars consider that this gap is due to social desirability bias in responses and in the design of the research methodology (Bagozzi, On the Neglect of Volition in Consumer Research: A Critique and Proposal, 1993), others also believe that consumers may also anticipate wrongly the shopping context which distracts them from their intentions. (Auger & Devinney, 2007) This is obviously a limitation inherent of the models that concentrate on attitudes and intentions as directly leading to behavior and isolating decision-making, and thus they fail to account for the situations (contextual) influences. (Foxall, 1993; Fukukawa, 2003)

Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell (2010) propose a holistic conceptual model that could account for the intention-behavior gap in the case of ethically concerned consumers. They suggest that there exist certain types of situations which inhibit the translation of intentions into behavior, namely the distraction in the shopping context, which makes the individual forget his/her intentions. But there also may be the fact that their anticipation are very different from the actual control of the individual, which makes the intentions impossible to implement. In their model, they aim to explore the mediating effect of implementation intention on behavior and the moderating effect of actual behavioral control and of the situational context as defined by Bagozzi (2000).

Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell (2010) adopted a qualitative research methodology in order to test their functioning of their conceptual model. In identifying whether the individual forms an implementation intention they follow the recommendations of verifying if there is a identification of a future situation ("if I find coffee from Fair Trade on the shelves of the supermarket") and the behavioral response associated with it ("then I will buy that product"). When trying to measure the implementation intention, researchers should thus identify whether there is an implementation plan (the "if, then" anticipation), the strength of the intentions and of the implementation plan and also the completeness of this plan. The implementation intentions are considered to play an important role in minimizing the influence of the moderating factors which may inhibit the performance of the intended behavior.

Going to the quantitative methodology used to test the theory of planned behavior and to the issue of measuring intention towards performing a certain behavior, Ajzen (2006) offers several guidelines for empirically using the TPB model. One important aspect to keep in mind concerning the variables within the model, is that they all are latent variables, that cannot be measured directly, so they need to be inferred from observable responses to items that are proxies for those variables. Under this condition, the terming of all the items for measuring the variables is highly important for a proper functioning of model testing. Thus, his recommendation is that the behavior under study be defined according to its “Target, Action, Context and Time – TACT”. (Ajzen, 2002, p. 2) For example, the behavior could be defined: “Buying eco-labeled fruit from the supermarket in the following week”. Then, intention could be measured by asking respondents to rate several items such as: “I intend to buy eco-labeled fruit from the supermarket in the following week.”, “I will try to buy eco-labeled fruit from the supermarket in the following week.”, “I plan to buy eco-labeled fruit from the supermarket in the following week”. Although this narrow definition of the intention yields good results in statistically testing the model, it is possible that this intention formation, almost imposed by the researcher through the measurement process might influence the subsequent behavior for those participating in the study.

Indeed, several researchers have observed that the survey measurement process may actually change the attitudes, intention and behavior it tries to measure. (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Morwitz, Johnson, & Schmittlein, 1993; Fitzsimmons & Morwitz, 1996) Morwitz, Johnson and Schmittlein (1993) discovered that measuring purchase intentions increased the probability of buying a product in the category studied. This leads to the possibly hypothesis that intention is not a fixed aspect ready to be measured, but rather might be a vehicle through which behavior is sometimes enacted. One possible explanation for this finding is that the intention measurement process may activate existing product information in the mind of the consumer, making it more salient. The second explanation is that the measurement process may lead to an increased involvement of the consumer with that product, which will increase his cognitive efforts related to it.

Following these findings, it is possible that the intent measurement process may increase the salience of attitudes surrounding the product central to that study or it may lead to a change in the attitudes, intention and behavior. Fitzsimmons and Morwitz (1996) analyse the effect of measuring intent on brand purchase and they found a systematic influence dependent on brand usage. For consumers that already use a certain brand, measuring purchase intentions will lead to an increase of the market share for that brand. However, if consumers asked about their intentions don't use any brand for that product, this will lead to an increase of the market share of the most well-known brands in that product category. These findings have important consequences on intent measurement: the mere process of measuring intent may lead to an overestimation of sales for brands less known.

5. Conclusions

Intention represents an important aspect in studying behavior as it is considered a close proxy to the performance of the behavior by some of the most frequently tested models is in consumer behavior: the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior. These models offered a simple and easy to test framework in studying behavioral decisions, however, they do not represent a complete explanation of behavior and in many cases the link between intention and subsequent behavior is weak.

Some new concepts were proposed to be included into these models by several scholars, as the behavioral estimation proposed by Shepperd and his colleagues (Shepperd, Hartwick & Warshaw,

1988) or self-identity and habit or past behavior by Conner and Armitage (1998). The concept of implementation intention was also proposed to be included in the model by the latter researchers. Nonetheless, Brandstatter, Lengfelder and Gollwitzer (2001) argued that the implementation intention is rather a mental strategy with a high flexibility in the face of changing opportunities for behavior implementation. One of the most important aspect of this concept is that it makes a strong link to the situational determinants of behavior, an aspect neglected in the traditionally used models.

The fact that the implementation intention links the goal intention to the external situational determinants while acting as an automatic trigger of behavior performance makes it interesting concept to study in situations where performance of behavior is more demanding for the individual. This strategy may be spontaneously used by individuals, but certainly few of them use it consciously. It would be interesting to test its functioning as a mental tool facilitating behavioral performance, acquired through learning. This could be of help for individuals who have difficulties in putting into practice their goal intentions.

From a managerial perspective, the fact the implementation intentions may function as a tool for performing behaviors where distractions get in the way, might be a helpful insight for certain types businesses. For businesses dedicated to promoting a healthy lifestyle, where consumers seem to get easily distracted and forget their health promoting intentions, using the implementation intentions could be an interesting way for consumers to achieve what they desire and for businesses to keep their consumers engaged. Further exploration of how these implementation intentions could be used for promoting the interests of the consumer and those of the business simultaneously is necessary.

Taking into account the novel perspective brought to the issue of the influence of the measurement process of intention of actual behavior by Fitzsimmons & Morwitz (1996), we can derive very important managerial implications for measuring intentions, when companies want to introduce a new product or brand into the market and would like to estimate the purchase intention. The well known brands benefit from the measurement process in itself and will see their market share increase in the group where the intention measurement has taken place, while less known brands might get overstated intentions that will not turn into actually buying the product. Thus, using the measurement of intention as a tool to influence subsequent behavior could be used as a valuable instrument by well known brands and should be carefully used for less well known brands.

Future research on the use of intention as an enabler for performing the behavior would be necessary and would have important consequences for companies as well as for the consumers themselves. More consumer self-awareness on the formation of intentions and on the use of implementation intentions as a tool for facilitating performance might help them in achieving the desired actions.

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