

Reasoned action and planned behavior theory



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Buyer Behavior and Marketing Strategy

The theory of reasoned action assumes that “ consumers consciously consider the consequences of the alternative behaviours under consideration and choose the one that leads to the most desirable consequences” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) where intention is the key cognitive demonstration of a persons willingness to carry out the specific behavior and is the “ single best predictor of actual behaviour” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) this means that any action that requires a certain amount of cognitive thinking and decision process requires a behavioral intention in order to complete the behavior. The Theory of reasoned action “ is not relevant for extremely simple or involuntary behaviours such as automatic eye blinking. Turning your head at the sound of the telephone, or sneezing” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008)

The Theory of reasoned action is an adapted and broadened development of the multiattribute model by Fishbein. This is a “ useful guide for devising strategies to change consumers’ attitudes” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008)

The theory also assumes that “ people tend to perform behaviors that are evaluated favourably and are popular with other people” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) therefore external and environmental factors influences such as the social environment and personal variables such as values, goals, lifestyle patterns and psychological characteristics manipulate the consumers intention to engage in the behavior. If the behavior is seen or regarded unpopular among people in close proximity of that person then it is highly likely that the intention to perform the behavior will not occur.

“ Behavioral intention (BI) is a proposition connecting self and future action” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) and these are created through “ Choice and Decision process” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) depending on consumers intention to engage in that behavior and the subjective norm regarding whether other people want the consumer to engage in that behavior.

The strength of intentions of the consumer is very important aspect as this is combined with evaluations that highlight the consumer’s salient beliefs about the “ function consequences” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008). This combination creates the attitude towards the behavior or action where we can see the overall manifestation of evaluation of performing the behavior. For marketers the measurements of these beliefs are important and the same method is used to measure beliefs about product attributes.

“ attitudes towards behaviors are likely to be strongly related to specific behavioral intentions” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008)

Thus in continuation if behavioral intentions and actions become more specific towards an object then this strongly changes attitudes toward the salient beliefs and consequences of the behavior moreover forming different evaluations. This is important as “ marketers must be careful to determine whether they are concerned with consumers’ attitudes toward the object in general or some action regarding the object” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) for the measurement of strengths and evaluations of salient beliefs about the consequences.

For example it would not be odd to find that a consumer enjoys eating take away fish and chips occasionally, but they would have negative attitudes

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toward eating takeaway fish and chips everyday as this behavior would have negative consequences and would not be perceived as a favourable or popular among other people.

The levels of specificity should be appropriate in relation to attitudes as more specific actions will see the need for different behaviours “ the measured intention should be specified at the same level as the observer” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) other wise the relationship between measured behavioural intentions and observed behaviour will be weakened. This relates to appropriateness of specific behavior in specific situations, for example if a person wore jeans to the gymnasium for a work out, the observed behaviour by the social norm would think it is inappropriate.

Social Norm is another key element in the theory of reasoned action as this “ reflects consumers’ perceptions of what other people want them to do” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008). This of course is directly linked with behavioral intention and the individual’s compliance to the expected social normative beliefs. Measured in probability of individual’s motivation to conform to the subjective social norm, similar technique to how behavioral intention and belief strength is measured. If the subjective norm is higher than intentional strength, then the behavior is evaluated under normative control rather than attitude linked control.

In addition another hugely important factor is time, “ time is the major predictive accuracy of measured intentions, the longer the intervening time period, the more unanticipated circumstances” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008) consumer intentions and attitudes change over time and the longer it takes

between measurement of intentions and observation of behavior the more likely other factors adjust the original intention so that it no longer corresponds to the observed behavior. “ Thus marketers must expect lower levels of predictive accuracy when intentions are measured long before the behavior occurs” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008)

In 1985 the Fishbein model was modified once again with an additional variable of perceived control in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this variable assumes that the consumer does not have complete voluntary control over some behaviors, if this is the case then we assume that the intentions are misleading which would create inaccuracies observed behavior. Addictions to smoking and alcohol would deter perceived control where he or she has little or not control, in comparison to someone walking into a supermarket and with out going through any cognitive or decision making processes picks up a Cadbury bar instead of a Mars bar.

But do consumers really approach and purchase products in the same fashioned way by the theory outlined? The theory is required to be falsifiable, and looking at different perspectives of authors, critiques and methods of application in real time environments we can come to a better understanding of whether this theory is accurate or not

Like any other theory posed in the past, the theory of reasoned action has been under criticism for the past 30 years, “ The theory of reasoned action identifies the types of cognitive and affective factors that underlie a consumer’s intention to perform a specific behavior, although intentions determine most voluntary behaviors, measures of consumers’ intentions

may not be perfect indicators of the actual intentions that determine the behavior” (P&O: 8th edition: 2008)

According to P&O, the theory of reasoned action gives possible motives, triggers and possible cognitive and decision making processes that determines peoples behaviors through behavioural intentions, The intentions themselves are not solid indicators that people will actually perform those behaviors.

According to David Trafimow in his Journal “ Theory of Reasoned Action: A case Study of Falsification in Psychology” (2009; 19; 501) David Trafimow poses a question which is also posed by Miniard and Cohen (1981) that criticises two key components, “ what if behavioural beliefs normative beliefs are really different names for each other?” and as a consequence Trafimow underlines that there is a conceptual problem with the theory of reasoned action. The suggested illustration of a behavior is eating a chocolate bar; the behavioral belief is “ my father will disagree with me if I eat a chocolate bar” and the normative belief is “ my father thinks I should not eat a chocolate bar”. This clearly suggests that there is a contradiction in the theory where it states that behavioral beliefs and normative beliefs have a clear distinction. As a result of this contradiction the theory is left “ rendered unfalsifiable” (Trafimow: 2009; 19; 501) so if this distinction is considered incorrect then surely attitude and subjective norms subject for question?

In contrast to the theory of reasoned action researchers believe that “ attitude contains both affective and cognitive variables” (Trafimow 2009; 19; 501), (Triandis 1980). Factor analysis is used on this assumption to test and

determine the conception of attitude by many researchers; however Trafimow indicates that researchers limiting themselves to factor analysis paradigms would in no way seem to falsify the theory. Instead, Trafimow & Sheeran (1998) include auxiliary assumptions to assume an associative hypothesis to test on participants associative pathways if beliefs that are more cognitive are likely to become associated with each other compared to beliefs that are more affective. The results substantiates the hypothesis, The participants in the study contiguously retrieved cognitive beliefs to each other and affective beliefs to each other; therefore it brings us to an essential assumption about the theory of reasoned action “ attitudes do not contain distinctive and affective components” (Trafimow & Sheeran, 1998) As a result of this falsification it is this reason that the theory has directed the modification to apply distinction in the Ajzen and Fishbein model (2005).

The application of theory of reasoned action in marketing environment research methods

Trafimow’s method of auxiliary assumptions to falsify theories has shown us that the theory of reasoned action is used widely by many researchers and marketers nevertheless it is still not an unconditional technique. Personally, the theory is still an assumption and it does not accurately illustrate consumers approach to the purchase of products, as shown by Trafimow’s case study the theory is proving unfalsifiable and has critical conceptual problems that would need to be addressed before this theory could be used to show accurate results, but even then human psychology and behavior studies are still in the dark ages and achieving that is a accomplishment for the future generations.