

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BEHAVIORAL ATTITUDES IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS. APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

People behave differently. The family we were born into, the personality we have acquired over the years, the group of friends we belong to or the culture of the country are elements that shape a consumer's behaviour. Over the years we are subjected to different factors, that influence our attitudes towards products or services, as well as the preferences shown. However, regardless of the differences between individuals, there is also a common basis - each of us has the role of a consumer in society.

In analyzing consumer behaviour, we cannot only consider the previously mentioned factors. An important role is held by the individual's self-esteem, which is, on numerous occasions, the foundation on which the individual's personality is built.

In this work, we defined self-esteem through its three facets (the real self, the social self, and the relational self) and followed the influence exerted by self-esteem on behavioral intentions, wanting to identify if, in this case, the relationship is mediated by behavioral attitudes. Thus, the conceptual model proposed in the practical part represents an application to the theory of planned behaviour.

Keywords: *self-esteem, social self, real self, relational self, behavioral intentions, behavioral attitudes*

JEL Classification: *M30, M31*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, individuals increasingly evoke the phrase "self-esteem" to define the image they have of their person, namely how they think they are viewed by members of reference groups and society as a whole. In reality, the meaning of this concept is much deeper, and its foundation is developed thanks to the field of psychology.

In this paper, we do not start only from the first definitions adopted in marketing, but we refer to self-esteem from the perspective of its components and the impact exerted on consumer behaviour.

Thus, we will analyze self-esteem from the perspective of the social self, the real self, and the relational self, aiming to see how it influences attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Human beings are inherently social creatures, and much of our personal identity is shaped by the social context in which we live. The concept of the social self refers to the idea that our sense of self is heavily influenced by the social groups and relationships that we are a part of.

The concept of the real self refers to the authentic, core identity of an individual, which is not influenced by external factors such as social norms, expectations, or roles. The real self is often contrasted with the ideal self, which represents the self that a person aspires to be, or the false self, which is an image that individuals may present to others to confirm or gain social approval.

The relational self is a concept that emphasizes the importance of social connections in personal identity. Unlike the individual self, which focuses on personal attributes and characteristics, the relational self is defined by the connections that individuals have with others. The relational self is shaped by social experiences, such as interactions with family, friends, and

romantic partners, and it can have a significant impact on an individual's sense of identity and well-being.

The three facets of self-esteem will be used in the formation of the construct, and within this approach we will follow the influence it exerts on behavioral intentions, the relationship being mediated by behavioral attitudes. Thus, a new applicability of the theory of planned behaviour will be pursued.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining the components of self-esteem

▪ *Social Self*

The social self is formed through a process of socialization, which begins in childhood and continues throughout our lives. During this process, we learn the norms, values, and beliefs of the society and culture that we are a part of, and we come to understand our place within that society. According to Mead (1934), our sense of self arises from our ability to take on the perspectives of others, which he refers to as "taking the role of the other." This involves imagining how others see us and how they would react to our behaviour, and adjusting our behaviour accordingly.

One of the key factors that influence the development of the social self is social identity theory, which suggests that individuals identify with and take pride in the social groups that they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory proposes that we categorize people into in-groups and out-groups based on shared characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or nationality and that we tend to view members of our group more positively than those of other groups. Social identity theory also proposes that our self-esteem is closely tied to the status of the groups to that we belong.

Another factor that influences the social self is the social comparison theory, which suggests that we evaluate our own abilities and opinions by comparing ourselves to others (Festinger, 1954). This can lead to a process of upward or downward social comparison, where we either compare ourselves to those who are doing better or worse than us, respectively. The social comparison theory can also explain the development of our self-concept, as we may adopt traits or behaviours of others that we perceive as desirable or successful.

In conclusion, the social self is a complex and multifaceted concept that is heavily influenced by the social context in which we live. Through processes such as socialization, social identity theory, social comparison, and social influence, we come to develop a sense of self that is shaped by our relationships with others and our place within society. Understanding the social self is important not only for our own personal development but also for understanding the behaviour of others and how we interact with the world around us.

▪ *Real Self*

The real self is characterized by authenticity, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. According to Rogers (1951), the real self is the core of an individual's personality, and it represents the unique pattern of experiences, feelings, and behaviours that make up their identity. The real self is not influenced by external factors, such as social norms or expectations, but rather emerges from an individual's innermost thoughts and feelings.

The formation of the real self is influenced by various factors, including early childhood experiences, socialization, and self-reflection. During early childhood, individuals begin to develop a sense of self through interactions with their caregivers and other family members. These experiences can shape an individual's beliefs, values, and attitudes, which are key components of

their real self. Socialization also plays a role in the formation of the real self, as individuals learn to adapt to social norms and expectations in order to fit in with others.

The importance of the real self in personal development cannot be overstated. When individuals are in touch with their real selves, they are more likely to experience a sense of fulfillment, meaning, and purpose in their lives. In contrast, individuals who are disconnected from their real selves may experience feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and depression. According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, self-actualization, or the realization of one's full potential, is the highest level of human needs. This can only be achieved when individuals are in touch with their real selves and are able to pursue their true passions and interests.

In conclusion, the concept of the real self is an important aspect of personal identity that is characterized by authenticity, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. It is formed through a combination of early childhood experiences, socialization, and self-reflection, and is critical for personal development and self-actualization. By understanding and embracing our real self, we can lead a more fulfilling and meaningful life, and become the best version of ourselves.

▪ Relational Self

The relational self is characterized by its focus on social connections and relationships. According to Brewer and Gardner (1996), the relational self is defined by the connections that individuals have with others, and it reflects the importance that individuals place on these relationships in their sense of identity.

The relational self, a component of self-esteem, captures interpersonal relationships between individuals, analyzing the connection and attachment that exists in relation to family members and close friends, specifying the roles of an individual within these relationships (Du et al., 2017; Nehrlich et al., 2018). The relational self represents the second stage in the formation of self-esteem. Based on the premise that the current self is the first step in this process, reflecting the individual's opinion about the attributes and traits possessed, the relational self depicts the attitude towards the people who are part of the proximal environment, with whom it is frequent, high-intensity interaction. People with a high level of relational self give more importance to family members and friends, taking into account the advice received and the opinions issued by them regarding the major decisions they have to make (Li et al., 2017). The support offered by the surrounding people is of greater importance, constituting a benchmark for the correctness of the decision taken. Interaction with family and close friends is governed by attachment, which determines the behaviour that individuals adopt (Nehrlich et al., 2018).

At the same time, we can consider that the relational self contributes to shaping the ideal self. The support we receive from the people around us and the trust we give them facilitates the shaping of each individual's personality, allowing him to evolve, following an upward path, which also corresponds to a high level of self-esteem.

The impact of the relational component on self-esteem is as important as that of the social component, often the boundary between them blurring and becoming a whole. Similar to the ideal self, the relational self can be perceived as a dynamic concept, the boundaries of which are continuously changing. As people evolve and advance in age, the social circle expands so that the individuals we get to know are more and more numerous, and their behaviours are often heterogeneous. Interactions with new acquaintances reflect on self-esteem, often picking up their customs, which facilitate personal development or professional advancement. Of course, there are many rules and habits that we end up taking on subconsciously, their use not always being a desired fact. However, we must remember that, most of the time, individuals are the product of the family in which they were born and raised, as well as the society in which they live.

2.2 The Theory of Planned Behaviour

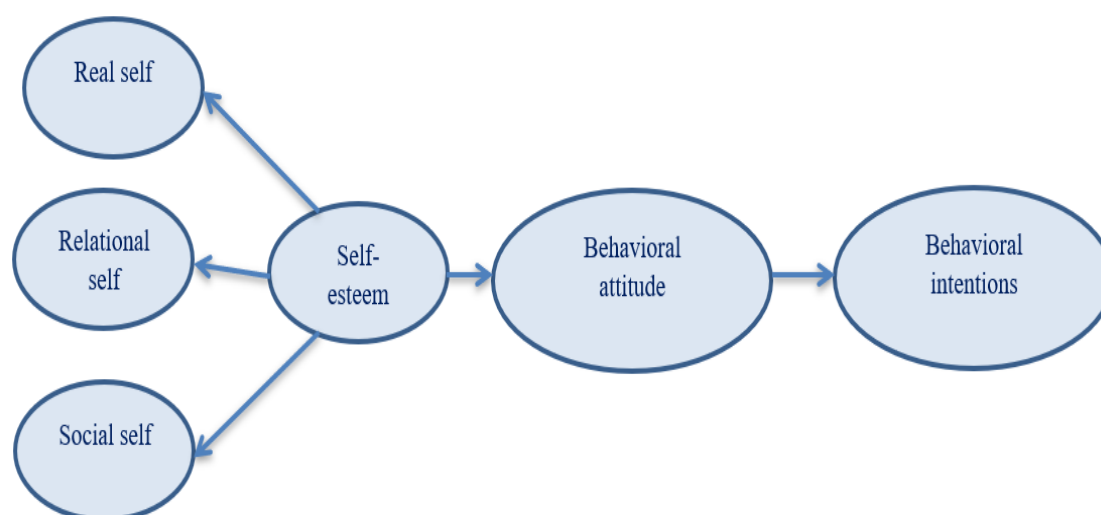
The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is a widely recognized model for understanding human behaviour and decision-making. Developed by Icek Ajzen in the 1980s, the TPB posits that an individual's behaviour is a function of their intention to perform a behaviour, which in turn is influenced by their attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In this study, we aim to identify the role that self-esteem and its components have on attitudes, respectively behavioral intentions. So, we discuss a new conceptual model, starting from the theory of planned behaviour.

Behavioral attitudes are a critical component of human behaviour, shaping how individuals approach and respond to different situations. Attitudes can be considered as positive or negative evaluations of an object, person, or situation, also having an emotional component (Plaias, 2011). Attitudes can have a significant impact on behaviour by influencing the decision-making process that individuals undertake. According to Ajzen and Fishbein (2000), attitudes can be divided into three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive component refers to an individual's beliefs about an object or situation, while the affective component refers to the emotional response that an individual has to the object or situation. The behavioral component refers to the individual's tendency to act in a certain way based on their cognitive and affective evaluations.

Behavioral intentions are a key factor in predicting and understanding human behaviour. Behavioral intentions refer to an individual's conscious plan to engage in a particular behaviour, and they are influenced by a range of factors, including attitudes, beliefs, and social norms.

3. Methodology

Starting from the theory of planned behaviour, we introduced the components of self-esteem as new elements. Thus, the real self, the relational self, and the social self lead to the formation of self-esteem. In the proposed conceptual model, social norms and perceived control, elements found in the theory of planned behaviour, were abandoned. Thus, the proposed conceptual model seeks to identify the link between the abstract concept of self-esteem and behavioral attitudes, subsequently identifying the influence exerted by attitudes on behavioral intentions (figure no. 1).



Figură 1: *The proposed conceptual model*

Source: made by the author

For this model we formulate the following secondary objectives:

O₁: Identifying the influence of an individual's self-esteem on behavioral attitudes.

O₂: Identifying the influence of behavioral attitudes on behavioral intentions.

In order to achieve the secondary objectives, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H₁: Self-esteem has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes.

H₂: Behavioral attitudes have a direct and positive influence on behavioral intentions.

The mediation hypothesis is also formulated:

H₃: Behavioral attitudes mediate the relationship between self-esteem and purchase intention”.

In order to achieve the proposed objectives and analyze the formulated hypotheses, a quantitative research was carried out using a questionnaire made up of 70 questions as a working tool. It was applied among the students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Management within UBB Cluj-Napoca.

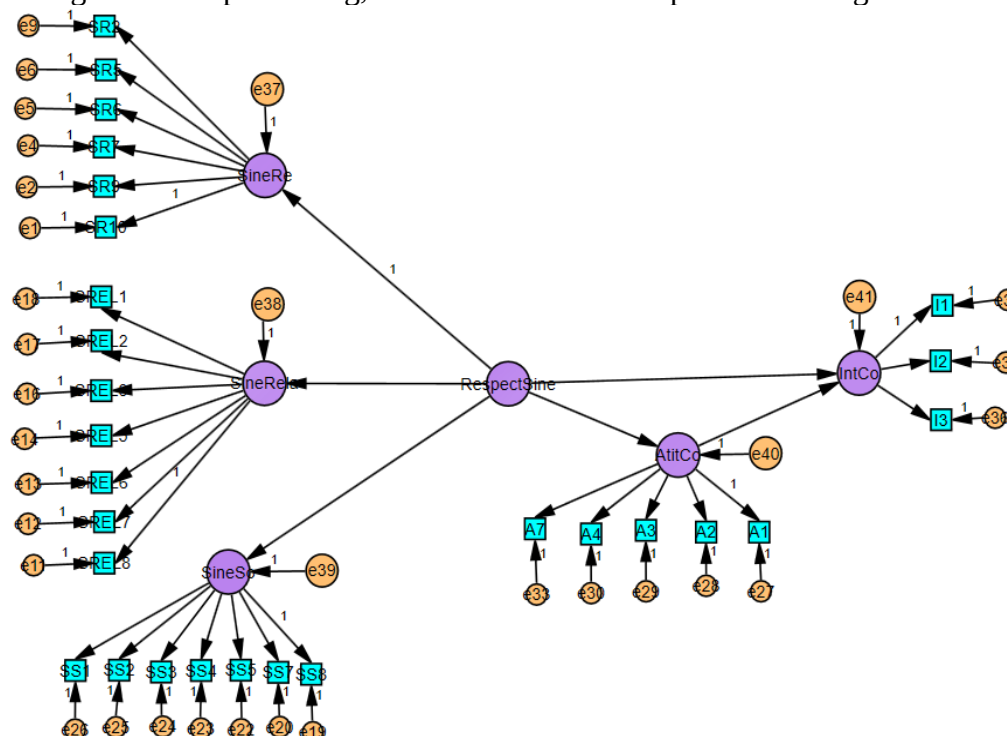
The sample was made up of 1,400 people, following the analysis of the collected materials, obtaining 1,233 valid questionnaires. The statistical processing was carried out with the help of SPSS and AMOS software.

4. Results and discussions

Following the application of the questionnaire, 1,233 valid answers were obtained. 61.20% of the respondents were people who came from the urban environment, most of them having an income between 501 - 1,000 lei (40.10%). 70% of the respondents were female, and in terms of age, the sample was represented by members of Generation Z (19 – 25 years old).

For the proposed structural model (figure no. 1), the fit of the model was tested. The specialized literature (Gaskin, 2016) recommends checking the matching conditions (creditworthiness indices) at each modification of the model.

Following statistical processing, the structural model is presented in figure no. 2.



Figură 2: *The structural model*

Source: made by the author

For the structural model in figure no. 2, the statistical results are presented in table no. 1.

Tabel nr. 1: *Fit indices for the measurement model*

Index	Obtained values for the measurement model	Minimum acceptable threshold levels (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2010)
GFI	0,905	$\geq 0,9$
RMSEA	0,055	$\leq 0,08$
χ^2 df (CMIN)	4,714	$\leq 2,5$ or ≤ 5
AGFI	0,888	$\geq 0,8$
IFI	0,923	$\geq 0,9$
TLI	0,916	$\geq 0,9$
CFI	0,923	$\geq 0,9$
PCLOSE	0,001	$\leq 0,05$

Source: made by the author

Starting from the statistical values obtained, we can establish the status of the previously formulated hypotheses. Thus, the hypothesis H₁: Self-esteem has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes is fully validated due to the plus sign of the standardized regression coefficient, but also the degree of significance of this coefficient.

Research shows that this link between variables can also be identified among young people from other geographical areas. For example, a 2017 study in Taiwan that looked at the effect of smartphone country of origin on students' intentions, behavioral attitudes, and self-esteem yielded an identical result to the general population. analyzed target. The study conducted by Wang and Huang (2018) demonstrates that self-esteem exerts a positive influence on behavioral attitudes. Therefore, the result obtained for the considered sample is also supported by the studies carried out in recent years, globally.

Also, hypothesis H₂: Behavioral attitudes have a direct and positive influence on behavioral intentions is fully validated, an aspect highlighted both by the positive value of the coefficient and by its degree of significance.

In the previously mentioned study (Wang and Huang, 2018) it is also demonstrated that behavioral attitudes have a positive influence on the intentions to buy a smartphone. In conclusion, the research carried out by the authors confirms one of the observations mentioned in the specialized literature.

To test the mediation hypothesis we use the Bootstrapping methods available in AMOS. The results obtained from the statistical analyzes demonstrate that behavioral attitude mediates the relationship between self-esteem and behavioral intention. In other words, the relationship between self-esteem and behavioral intention is explained by behavioral attitude. In this situation, there is a confirmation of the mediation hypothesis.

In conclusion, three hypotheses were formulated for the proposed conceptual model (figure no. 1). With the help of the statistical analyzes carried out in relation to the resulting structural model, their validation was allowed.

5. Conclusions

For the conceptual model proposed in figure no. 1, three hypotheses were formulated: two regarding the relationship between the components of the model and a mediation hypothesis.

The proposed conceptual model presents the relationship between the abstract concept of self-esteem and attitude, respectively behavioral intention. The three facets of the self-esteem construct are the real self, the relational self, and the social self.

The first relationship tested was between self-esteem and behavioral attitudes. Statistical processing allowed the confirmation of this link between the two constructs.

The relationship between attitudes and behavioral intentions was analyzed through the lens of hypothesis number 2, the link being confirmed in this context as well.

Also, the statistical processing confirmed the mediation hypothesis, strengthening the presumption that the relationship between self-esteem and behavioral intentions is mediated through the prism of attitudes.

In conclusion, we highlight that for the proposed conceptual model the results obtained regarding the formulated hypotheses are consistent with the studies in the literature.

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