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THE THEORY OF REASONED ACTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROMOTING RECREATIONAL SPORT PROGRAMS

Key words: Theory of Reasoned Action, intention to participate, sport marketing.

ABSTRACT

The Theory of Reasoned Action has received considerable attention in sport and exercise literature. However, there have been limited attempts to apply the theory, and examine it from a marketing perspective. The aim of the present study was to empirically test this theoretical framework, assess its ability to predict intention to participate in organized recreational sport programs, and identify its marketing implications. Three hundred and fifty individuals, residents of the city of Thessaloniki, Greece, participated in the study. The theory was shown to provide a useful framework for studying intentions, since it predicted 21% of its variance. Both the attitudinal and the normative components of the theory made significant contributions to the study, with the former being the major contributor. The implications of these results for developing marketing strategies for sport programs are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that attitudes significantly influence behavior [26]. Attitude research can help marketers on a variety of issues, such as understanding consumers' reactions to promotional campaigns, estimating the success of new products/services, and deciding on advertising strategies to reinforce positive attitudes before or after purchase [27]. In their attempts to understand the relationship between attitudes and behavior, psychologists developed a variety of structural models, such as multi-attribute attitude models, the tri-component model, and the attitude-toward-the-ad model [30]. Their aim has always been the study of the underlying dimensions of attitudes and their inter-relations in order to predict consumer behavior [26]. A prominent multi-attribute attitude model has been the Theory of Reasoned Action [2, 3], which has been a popular topic in health and exercise behavior research [21].

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) offers a theoretical framework, which might be useful in answering questions related to the way individuals take decisions regarding their participation in exercise activities in sport settings. Do personal values and attitudes influence them, or do their choices reflect what they believe others expect from them? What is the role of the social influence on their decisions? These are important questions for marketers, which can be answered with the aid of the mentioned theory. The objectives of the present study were:

- a) to empirically test the TRA and assess its ability to predict intention to participate in organized sport programs;
- b) to apply this theoretical framework and identify its marketing implications.

The Theory of Reasoned Action

The Theory of Reasoned Action [2, 3] was developed to expand the tri-component attitude model, which suggested that attitudes were composed of cognitive, affective and conative components [20]. The cognitive component consists of consumers' knowledge and perceptions about the product/service, which commonly take the form of beliefs. Consumers believe that the object possesses various attributes and that a specific behavior will lead to specific outcomes [30]. These beliefs are formed based on direct experience, and on related information from various sources. The affective component consists of consumers' emotions and feelings about the product/service. These emotions and feelings are frequently treated by researchers as evaluative in nature [30]. Finally, the conative component is concerned with the likelihood that an individual will engage in that behavior.

The Theory of Reasoned Action [2, 3] incorporates and extends the three components. It suggests that the behavioral intention is the single best predictor of actual behavior. The theory can be presented as follows: $\text{Intention} = \text{Attitudes} + \text{Subjective Norms}$. The attitude is a function of the individual's salient behavioral beliefs, which can be positive or negative outcomes expected from performing a specific behavior. The subjective norm component consists of the beliefs of significant others and the extent that one wishes, or is motivated, to comply with these people's beliefs (motivation to comply). A subjective norm can be measured directly by assessing a consumer's feeling as to what relevant others (e.g., friends) would think of the action being contemplated.

The Theory of Reasoned Action has become one of the most widely used psychological frameworks to explain and predict human behavior. It has been applied to a variety of behaviors, including exercise participation of general population [19], exercise adherence [33], physical activity of corporate employees [24], students' participation in sporting activities [14, 15, 16], women's exercise behavior [34], leisure participation [1], and tourism consumer behavior [10].

The theory has received widespread support. On conducting a meta-analysis of studies using the theory in a variety of consumer-related behaviors, Sheppard, Hartwick, and Warshaw [32] reported a weighted average correlation between intention and behavior of 0.53, and between attitude and social norm with intention of 0.66. Godin [18], who

reviewed studies in exercise behavior, reported similar results. Approximately 30% of the variance in intention to exercise has been explained by the attitudinal component. However, the normative component seems to be less consistently associated with intention to exercise and does not appear to be a stable variable for the interpretation of exercise behavior [18, 32].

Despite the significant marketing implications [29], most of these studies had a psychological orientation, and there have been limited efforts [10] to use the theory as a framework for guiding marketing decisions. In order to develop effective strategies, sport program marketers need to determine whether the attitudinal or the normative components have a major influence on behavioral intentions (and thus on behavior).

One of the elements of the Theory of Reasoned Action that has been criticized is the assumption that most human behaviors are to some degree subject to volitional control, and hence determined by intention [18, 21]. The theory recognizes that personality and other socio-cultural variables influence behavior, however, this influence is thought to be a function of attitudinal and normative considerations. However, as Smith and Biddle [33] argue, there may be several behavioral barriers preventing it from being totally volitional (e.g., social responsibilities, job commitment etc.), and especially in the context of participation in sport and exercise. This argument can also be supported by reviewing studies investigating perceived constraints to leisure and sport participation [12, 6]. The behavioral constraints were conceptualised in these studies as structural, intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints [11]. These perceived constraints intervene between intention to participate and actual participation and they render any attempt to predict participation rather difficult.

METHODS

Participants and procedure

The data were collected by means of a household survey, conducted in an urban area in Greece (city of Thessaloniki). One thousand individuals adult subjects were contacted, of whom 35% completed the questionnaire ($n = 350$). A demographic analysis of the sample indicated that females were the majority in the sample (57%).

The mean age of the sample was 34 years old (SD = 12.6).

Measures

Respondents completed a questionnaire, which included the main elements of the Theory of Reasoned Action, as suggested by Ajzen and Fishbein [2, 3].

Behavioral intention: intention to engage in organized sport programs was assessed using three items on a 7-point Likert-style scale (from unlikely to very likely). These were: "I intend to participate in organized sport programs in the following month", "I will try to participate in organized sport programs in the following month", and "I am determined to participate in organized sport programs in the following month". The mean of these scales produced a composite scale.

Attitude: a direct measure of attitude was used assessed using a 7-point scale. Respondents were presented with the sentence, "I think that participation in organized sport programs is ...". Six pairs of adjectives were rated: useful/useless, beneficial/harmful, important/not important, interesting/non-interesting, pleasant/boring and easy/difficult. The mean of the scale was taken as a composite scale.

Subjective Norm: a global measure of subjective norm was used, with a composite score derived from three items: "My parents approve of my participation in organized sport programs", "My friends approve of my participation in organized sport programs", "My boyfriend/girlfriend/husband/wife approves of my participation in organized sport programs".

RESULTS

Reliability: the internal consistency reliability of the three scales, as described above, was assessed using Cronbach's alpha scores. They all showed to have acceptable scores. The intention scale had the highest value of alpha (0.97), followed by the attitude (0.84), and the subjective norms (0.79) scales. The means, the standard deviation, and the alpha scores of the three scales are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability Analysis

	Mean	SD	Alpha
Intention	4.11	1.1	0.97
Attitudes	5.95	0.91	0.84
Subjective Norms	5.36	1.2	0.79

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis for the Predictors of Intention

Predictors	Multiple					
	B	β	R	R ²	F	p
Attitudes	0.51	0.39	0.43	0.18	80.2	0.001
Subjective Norms	0.69	0.15	0.46	0.21	46.0	0.001

Prediction of Intention to Participate

In order to assess the degree to which the two components of the Theory of Reasoned Action can predict the intention of participation, a stepwise regression analysis was performed, using the intention as the dependent variable and the two components (attitudes and subjective norm) as the predictors. Table 2 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients (B), the standardized regression coefficients (β), the multiple R, and R². As shown, both the components together accounted for 21% of the variance in intention (R = 0.46). The attitudinal component was shown to be the most powerful predictor of intention (F = 80.2; p < 0.001, R = 0.43), while the normative component offered a smaller but also significant contribution (F = 46.0; p < 0.001).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to use the Theory of Reasoned Action as a framework for predicting intention to participate in organized sport programs, and identify the marketing implications of the findings. The study shows that the theory offers a significant contribution to the prediction of intention to participate, since the model predicted 21% of the variance in the dependent variable. This supports previous findings conducted in similar settings (see [21] for a meta-analysis of the published studies). Furthermore, the results indicated that the attitudinal component was the main

predictor of intention to participate, since it accounted for 18% of the variance in the dependent variable. The contribution of the normative component was small (about 3%). These findings once again confirm the results of previous studies. Godin [18], who reviewed studies in exercise behavior, reported that the attitudinal component of the model was the main contributor to the prediction of intention to participate. In contrast, the normative component seems to be less consistently associated with intention to exercise [21].

Since the results indicated that intention was largely influenced by the attitudinal component, the marketing strategy should attempt to influence both the cognitive and affective components of attitudes. The primary means by which attitudes are formed is through consumers' direct experience in trying and evaluating the sport services [20]. Subsequently, and in order to influence the cognitive component, the marketing strategy should attempt to create and communicate a set of salient beliefs about the positive consequences of the behavior (participation). This simply means that the promotion of the health benefits of exercise participation should be an important part within organizations' communication strategy. There has been extensive research on the physical, psychological, and social benefits of participation in exercise [25, 31, 35]. Consumers need to be clearly informed about these positive consequences of participation in exercise. Using both impersonal and interpersonal communication channels might be the most effective strategy. Impersonal communication channels include the print and electronic mass media. The choice obviously depends on the financial resources of organisations (e.g., sport clubs, fitness centres etc.) and groups to be targeted, according to their marketing plans. However, in any case, it is important that the communicated message is designed around the health benefits of participation. Interpersonal communication channels might include group presentations and seminars by sport scientists, individual counselling by fitness professionals and personal trainers, and face-to-face conversations with sport organisations' salespersons and public relation officers. The role of the salespersons in communicating the health benefits of exercise participation to perspective and new members of the organisations/sport clubs should be emphasized.

As previously discussed, the affective component of attitudes consists of consumer's

emotions and feelings about a particular behavior. According to Shiffman and Kanuk [30], these emotions and feelings are primarily evaluative in nature, i.e. they capture an individual's direct or global assessment of the attitude-object. This means that the experience of participation is an important issue in creating positive affective attitudes. If the experience is evaluated as pleasant, and customers are satisfied by the services, they are most likely to develop positive attitudes. Research on consumer satisfaction [7, 23] and perceived service quality [22] can offer solutions for designing and implementing strategies to satisfy customers. Buttle and Bok [10] successfully indicated how empirical data from the Theory of Reasoned Action and the SERVQUAL model [28] can be used together to improve hotel marketing strategy. A customer-orientated approach to sport programs needs to be adopted. This should be evident in all the aspects of facility, operation and human resource management. The staff quality in any sport setting should be emphasised. Employees are integral part of the marketing process, since sport clubs and fitness centres are all service organisations. Issues such as staff knowledge, experience, hiring, training, appearance, empathy and responsiveness are very important [9]. Most of these issues are addressed in service quality models, such as the SERVQUAL [28], the SERVPERF [13] and the CSQ [22] models. Furthermore, issues related to the tangible assets of sport organisations, such as the quality and the variety of the facilities, services and programmes, as well as issues related to the environment, cleanness and safety of the facilities need to be carefully managed. The objective should always be to provide a positive and pleasant experience for the customers.

As discussed previously, the normative component of attitudes offered a small but significant contribution to the prediction of intention to participation. This suggests that, while targeting significant others should not be the main marketing strategy, it is an issue that should not be overlooked. Developing positive word-of-mouth should be among the marketing objectives. Furthermore, marketers need to emphasise that significant others are in favour of the behavior. This can also be achieved by portraying social influence situations in advertising. Finally, the promotion of family, group and corporate programmes might be very helpful, since they might enhance the social dimension of participation. It is worth noting that

the influence of reference groups on intention to participate might vary in different target groups. Women might be more affected by the normative component, which needs further investigation. Furthermore, it should be reminded that only adult individuals were included in the sample. The influence of reference groups on adolescents' decision-making for exercise participation is another issue that needs further research.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The results of the present study indicated that the two components of the Theory of Reasoned action offer a fairly significant contribution to the prediction of intention. This suggests that more factors need to be considered in order to predict intention to participate more accurately. Furthermore, the relationship between measured intention and actual behavior is an issue that needs special consideration. The theory recognises that personality and other socio-cultural variables influence behavior, however, their influence is thought to be a function of attitudinal and normative considerations. This has been criticized, since it has been argued that exercise behavior is not totally under volitional control [33]. As a result, an extended theory was proposed, called the "Theory of Planned Behavior". It is the same framework as the Theory of Reasoned Action with the addition of a new variable called "perceived behavioral control". Recent studies [8, 33] have indicated that the inclusion of this variable significantly enhances the prediction of both intention and actual behavior.

However, in order for the Theory of Planned Behavior to be useful from a marketing and management perspective, it is important to analyse first the concept of "perceived behavioral control", and, second, to find out if marketers can influence it. This is an issue that needs further research and much analysis that falls beyond the scope of the present study. Smith and Biddle [33] argued that there might be several behavioral barriers preventing the behavior from being totally volitional, such as social responsibilities and job commitment. However, it is a more complex issue, and linking it with extensive literature on leisure constraint, can support this. Future studies might utilize both the Theory of Planned Behavior and the hierarchical model of leisure constraints [12] with the aim of predicting more accurately both intention to participate and the actual behavior.

The degree of voluntary control is not the only factor that weakens the relationship between measured behavioral intention, and actual behavior. According to Peter and Olson [29], factors such as intervening time, the situational context, new information, unforeseen environmental events and different level of specificity are important ones, and might negatively affect marketers' attempts to predict behavior, based on consumers' intentions. Subsequently, and in order for the findings to be useful from a marketing perspective, intention should be measured at the same level of abstraction and specificity as the action. There should be efforts to control these factors in future studies. The present study did not examine the framework in relation to actual behavior (participation/non-participation, and frequency of participation). The inclusion of these variables is a step further. A more advanced and more powerful statistical analysis, such as structural modelling, could help with the inclusion of new variables. Finally, it might be useful to examine demographic data in relation to the framework. Studies from general consumer and exercise behavior [5, 6] suggest that there are significant differences in consumer decision-making across different demographic groups.

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