SOFTWARE & TECH

Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour

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Understanding Human Behaviour: The Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behaviour

Why do people act the way they do? This question has fascinated psychologists, marketers, and public health officials for decades. While there is no single answer that fits every situation, two closely related models have proven remarkably effective at explaining and predicting human behaviour: the **Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behaviour**. These frameworks help us move beyond guesswork and into a structured understanding of how attitudes, social pressures, and perceived control shape our decisions. Whether you are designing a health campaign, launching a new product, or simply trying to understand your own habits, grasping these theories offers a powerful lens through which to view human action. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour**, breaking down their origins, core components, practical applications, and lasting significance.

The Origins: From Reasoned Action to Planned Behaviour

The story begins in the 1960s and 1970s with social psychologist Martin Fishbein, who sought to improve the predictive power of attitudes on behaviour. He developed the **theory of reasoned action** alongside Icek Ajzen. The central premise was elegantly simple: people are rational beings who consider the consequences of their actions before deciding to engage in them. According to this model, the most immediate determinant of behaviour is **behavioural intention** – a person's readiness to perform a given behaviour. Intention, in turn, is shaped by two key factors: the **attitude toward the behaviour** and the **subjective norm**.

However, a significant limitation soon became apparent. The **theory of reasoned action** assumed that all behaviours are under complete volitional control. In reality, many actions require resources, opportunities, or skills that a person may lack. Recognising this gap, Icek Ajzen extended the model in the 1980s, adding a third determinant of intention: **perceived behavioural control**. This evolved framework became the **theory of planned behaviour**. Together, these two models form the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour**, a cornerstone of contemporary behavioural science.

Core Components of the Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behaviour

Behavioural Intention: The Immediate Precursor

Both models agree that the strongest predictor of actual behaviour is the individual's intention to perform it. Intention captures the motivation and willingness to try. For example, a smoker who intends to quit within the next month is far more likely to succeed than one with no such intention. However, intention alone is not

sufficient; it must be supported by the underlying cognitive and social factors that feed into it.

Attitude Toward the Behaviour

This component refers to the degree to which a person evaluates the behaviour favourably or unfavourably. It is shaped by **behavioural beliefs**– the perceived likelihood that performing the behaviour will lead to certain outcomes, combined with the evaluation of those outcomes. For instance, if someone believes that regular exercise will improve health (a positive belief) and values health highly, their attitude toward exercising will likely be positive. Attitude is thus a function of personal cost-benefit analysis.

Subjective Norm: The Social Pressure

Humans are inherently social creatures. The **subjective norm** refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a behaviour. It is determined by **normative beliefs** – what significant others (family, friends, colleagues) think about the behaviour – and the **motivation to comply**with those expectations. If a teenager believes their close friends disapprove of smoking and they value those friendships, the subjective norm will discourage smoking. This element captures the influence of peer pressure, cultural norms, and social expectations.

Perceived Behavioural Control: The Key Addition

This is what distinguishes the **theory of planned behaviour** from its predecessor. Perceived behavioural control refers to the individual's perception of how easy or difficult it is to perform the behaviour. It is rooted in **control beliefs**about the presence of factors that may facilitate or impede performance, weighted by the perceived power of these factors. A person may have a positive attitude toward jogging and feel social support for it, but if they perceive a lack of time, no safe place to run, or a physical limitation, their intention and subsequent behaviour may weaken. Importantly, perceived behavioural control can influence both intention and behaviour directly, especially when the behaviour is not under complete volitional control.

How the Two Theories Work Together

Understanding the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour** requires recognising their relationship. The **theory of reasoned action** is essentially a special case of the broader **theory of planned behaviour**. When perceived behavioural control is high (meaning the behaviour is seen as easy and entirely within the person's control), the **theory of reasoned action** provides an adequate explanation. However, when barriers exist or when the behaviour requires resources or skills, the **theory of planned behaviour**offers a more complete picture. In practice, researchers and practitioners often use the combined framework, acknowledging that attitudes, norms, and perceived control together best predict intentional action.

Practical Applications Across Disciplines

Health Promotion and Behaviour Change

Perhaps the most widespread application of the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour**is in health psychology. Campaigns to increase vaccination uptake, promote condom use, encourage healthy eating, or reduce binge drinking have all been designed using this framework. For example, a campaign to promote physical activity might target attitudes by highlighting the benefits of exercise, address subjective norms by showcasing peer support groups, and enhance perceived behavioural control by offering free gym passes or home workout guides. By addressing all three determinants, interventions become more effective than those focusing on a single factor.

Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

Marketers have long used these theories to understand purchase intentions. A consumer's decision to buy a

product is influenced by their attitude toward the product (do I like it?), subjective norms (do my friends approve?), and perceived behavioural control (can I afford it? Is it available?). Advertisements often aim to shift attitudes, while testimonials and influencer endorsements target subjective norms. Offering payment plans can address perceived behavioural control. Understanding these

Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour helps marketers craft messages that resonate on multiple levels.

Environmental Psychology and Sustainability

Encouraging pro-environmental behaviour, such as recycling, using public transport, or conserving energy, has proven challenging. The theories offer a structured approach. Attitudes can be improved by educating people about the environmental impact of their choices. Subjective norms can be shifted by highlighting that a majority of citizens already engage in sustainable practices. Perceived behavioural control can be enhanced by ensuring that recycling bins are conveniently located or that public transport routes are accessible. Many successful environmental campaigns are grounded in the principles of the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour**.

Technology Adoption

The technology acceptance model, widely used in information systems research, is directly derived from the **theory of reasoned action**. It posits that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (a concept closely related to perceived behavioural control) determine attitudes toward using a new technology, which in turn influence intention and actual use. Understanding these precursors helps designers create user-friendly systems and organisations implement technology change more smoothly.

Criticisms and Limitations of the Theories

No model is without its limitations, and the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour**has faced several criticisms over the decades.

The Intention-Behaviour Gap

One of the most notable shortcomings is that intention does not always translate into actual behaviour. A person may fully intend to exercise but fail to follow through due to forgetfulness, procrastination, or unexpected circumstances. The theories have been criticised for over-relying on intention as the sole immediate predictor of behaviour, without adequately accounting for the gap between intention and action. Subsequent models, such as the **health action process approach**, have sought to address this by including post-intentional factors like planning and action control.

Rationality Assumption

Critics argue that the models assume a rational, deliberative decision-making process. In reality, much of human behaviour is habitual, impulsive, or influenced by unconscious biases. While perceived behavioural control captures some non-volitional aspects, the models do not fully account for automatic processes. For example, a smoker may have strong intentions to quit but relapse due to an ingrained habit triggered by environmental cues.

Measurement Challenges

Operationalising the constructs can be difficult. Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control must be measured in a way that is specific to the behaviour in question. Vague or poorly worded questionnaires can produce unreliable results. Moreover, the relative importance of each predictor varies across behaviours and populations, requiring careful pilot testing.

Cultural Limitations

The models were developed in Western, individualistic cultures. In more collectivist societies, subjective norms may carry greater weight than attitudes, and the concept of perceived behavioural control may be interpreted

Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour can be very powerful in predicting adaptation to local contexts.

Enhancements and Related Models

Recognising these limitations, researchers have proposed extensions. The **integrated behavioural model** combines elements from the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour** with other constructs, such as knowledge, skills, and environmental constraints. It also distinguishes between experiential and instrumental attitudes, and between injunctive and descriptive norms. Descriptive norms refer to what people actually do (as opposed to what they approve of), which adds a powerful social influence dimension. Another extension is the **reasoned action approach**, which refines the conceptualisation of perceived behavioural control by separating it into **self-efficacy** and **controllability**.

Practical Implications for Changing Behaviour

If you are designing an intervention based on the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour**, the following steps provide a useful guide:

- Identify the target behaviour clearly and specifically. Vague goals lead to vague intentions.
- Conduct formative research to understand the salient beliefs underlying attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control for your specific population.
- Target attitudes by providing credible information about positive outcomes and challenging negative beliefs.
- Influence subjective norms by engaging respected peers, highlighting community approval, and showcasing role models.
- Enhance perceived behavioural control by removing barriers, providing training, offering resources, and building self-efficacy through small successes.
- Measure intentions and the three determinants before and after the intervention to evaluate its impact.

This systematic approach has been successfully employed in campaigns ranging from **HIV prevention** to **renewable energy adoption**. By addressing the root causes of intention, rather than simply exhorting people to change, interventions become more effective and sustainable.

Conclusion

The **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour** remains one of the most influential frameworks in social psychology and behavioural science. Its strength lies in its parsimony and practical applicability. By distilling the complex determinants of human behaviour into just three core components – attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control – it provides a clear roadmap for understanding why people act as they do and how to encourage change. While no theory is perfect, and the models have evolved and been supplemented over time, the core insights of the **Theory Of Reasoned Action And Planned Behaviour** continue to guide research and practice across health, marketing, environmental studies, and beyond. For anyone seeking to predict, explain, or influence human action, this framework offers a solid foundation that has stood the test of empirical scrutiny.

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