



The role of anticipated negative emotions and past behavior in individuals' physical activity intentions and behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present research examined whether anticipated negative emotions predicted one's physical activity intentions and behaviors after controlling for the theory of planned behavior (TPB) constructs. This research analyzed the moderating role of past behavior on the relationship between anticipated negative emotions and intentions.

Method: University students completed a two-wave longitudinal survey. The first wave of the survey included the TPB questions, anticipated negative emotions, and previous physical activity behaviors. The second wave was conducted four weeks later and included adapted leisure-time exercise questions.

Results: Anticipated negative emotions significantly predicted physical activity intentions, over and above the influence of the TPB variables. It was further observed that anticipated negative emotions were a stronger predictor of intentions for participants who did not regularly participate in physical activity in the past than for those who did. In addition, anticipated negative emotions did not directly predict the actual behavior.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that the inclusion of past behavior can help better delineate the conditions under which anticipated emotions predict behavioral intentions.

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Regular physical activity contributes to an individual's overall health and well-being and is an effective way to help offset the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity in the United States and in the other parts of the world (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006; World Health Organization, 2003). However, a significant number of people lead a sedentary lifestyle and do not meet the recommended level of physical activity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007; World Health Organization, 2003). To understand the psychological correlates of physical activity, a body of research in physical activity has used the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) as the theoretical framework (e.g., Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002; Kwan & Bryan, 2010; Mohiyeddini, Pauli, & Bauer, 2009).

The present research sought to examine the role of anticipated emotional reactions and past behavior in predicting one's exercise intentions and behaviors, which contributes to the TPB and physical exercise literature in three ways: First, research related to anticipated emotions in the physical exercise domain is limited, and two early studies (Abraham & Sheeran, 2003, 2004) focused mainly on the role of anticipated regret in predicting exercise intentions and

behaviors. However, failing to participate in physical exercise can result in emotions other than regret, for example, feeling tense, guilt, or anger. Thus, it might be useful to broaden the measurement of anticipated regret to include other relevant emotions. Second, this project postulates that the relationship between emotions and intentions may differ between those who regularly participated and those who did not regularly participate in physical exercise; this postulate may provide a more detailed understanding of the circumstances under which anticipated emotions predict behavioral intentions. Lastly, the inclusion of past behavior in the TPB research remains debated (e.g., Ajzen, 2002a; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Although previous research revealed that past behavior can moderate the relationships between the TPB variables (i.e., perceived behavioral control) and behaviors (Norman, Conner, & Bell, 2000), more evidence is needed. In addition, no research has examined the moderating role of past behavior on the relationship between anticipated negative emotions and intentions.

The TPB

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) maintains that behavior is determined by intentions to perform the given behavior and/or perceived behavioral control (i.e., whether the performance of a behavior is up to the individual) and that intentions are determined by attitudes

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toward the behavior (i.e., favorable or unfavorable evaluation of a behavior), subjective norms (i.e., perceived social pressure/approval to perform or not to perform a behavior), and perceived behavioral control. Although the exact nature of the control component remains debated (e.g., Ajzen, 2002b; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Rodgers, Conner, & Murray, 2008), Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) stated that the inclusion of self-efficacy, in addition to perceived behavioral control, can provide a comprehensive understanding of the control factor. Self-efficacy is defined as one's ability and confidence in performing the behavior (Bandura, 1997), which is conceptually different from whether the performance of a behavior is up to the individual. A substantial amount of research has confirmed the relationships specified by the TPB in a variety of behavioral contexts and that self-efficacy contributed a unique amount of variance in intentions and behaviors (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Hagger et al., 2002). More specifically, in the physical activity domain, Hagger et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis of 72 applications of the TPB and its predecessor, the theory of reason action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), observed that attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and past behavior had moderately strong relationships with physical activity intentions, whereas subjective norms and self-efficacy had weak relationships with intentions.

Anticipated negative emotions

Recent studies found that anticipated negative emotions (e.g., anticipated regret) predicted behavioral intentions, over and above the TPB components in several behavioral contexts including physical exercise (Abraham & Sheeran, 2004; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). Anticipated negative emotions are defined as the negative feelings that might arise after a certain action or inaction (van der Pligt & de Vries, 1998). Consistent with this definition, a number of negative emotions are used to measure the concept (Sandberg & Conner, 2008). For example, Conner, Sandberg, McMillian, and Higgins (2006) used regret, worried, sad, sorry, and ashamed, whereas Walsh (2005) used anxious, tense, guilty, regretful, and worried. On the other hand, a few regret-based studies used regret and upset (e.g., Abraham & Sheeran, 2004).

Anticipated emotions are considered as a distinct construct from general attitudes or affective attitudes. They focus on the feelings that individuals anticipate if or after they perform a bad behavior or do not perform a good behavior in the future, whereas the attitude construct measures the evaluative aspects of attitudes (e.g., good – bad, important – unimportant) and whether it is fun or enjoyable to perform a given behavior (e.g., enjoyable – unenjoyable, pleasant – unpleasant; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). It is important to note that anticipated emotions focus on the feelings about the consequences of the behavior and that the affective attitudes focus on what the respondents feel and think about toward the behavior itself (French et al., 2005). Sandberg and Conner (2008) provided a convincing argument for the distinction between anticipated negative emotions (i.e., anticipated regret) and attitudes. In addition, factor analytic analysis provided evidence for the discriminant validity of anticipated emotions and attitudes (Abraham & Sheeran, 2004; Richard, van der Pligt, & de Vries, 1996).

Because negative emotions are inherently unpleasant (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Izard, 1977), people intend to perform remedial behaviors or avoid bad behaviors in order to alleviate the negative emotions. Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, and Zhang (2007) state that emotions do not directly cause behaviors. Instead, emotions result in cognitive processing and provide feedback regarding whether a behavior should be performed or avoided in the future; that is, the influence of emotions is mediated by intentions. Furthermore, individuals can experience the desired emotional outcomes by anticipating the emotional outcomes of

future behaviors (Baumeister et al., 2007; Tangney et al., 2007). Sandberg and Conner's (2008) meta-analysis revealed that after controlling for attitudes, norms, perceived behavioral control, and past behavior, anticipated regret (or emotions) was positively associated with behavioral intentions and was not directly associated with behavior. Similarly, in the context of physical exercise, Abraham and Sheeran (2003, 2004) found that anticipated regret was directly associated with intentions, but not with behavior.

The moderating role of past behavior

For repeated behaviors, past behavior can increase the variance explained in intentions and in the later behavior (Ajzen, 2002a; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). For instance, Conner and Armitage's (1998) review found that past behavior, on average, explained 7.2% of the variance in intentions in 12 studies after attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control were taken into account and explained 13.0% of the variance in behavior in seven studies after intentions and perceived behavioral control were controlled for. Similarly, Hagger et al. (2002) found that past behavior had standardized path coefficients of .37 and .55 with physical activity intentions and behaviors, respectively. Despite the strong evidence concerning the predictive power of past behavior on intentions and behaviors, these findings are interpreted as that intentions can be based on heuristic extrapolations from previous behaviors (Rise, Åstrøm, & Sutton, 1998) or that the TPB does not provide a complete description of intention formation (e.g., Conner & Armitage, 1998). In addition, Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) state that past behavior does not have the same status of attitudes, norms, or control because it cannot be used to explain intentions and behaviors.

The present research argues that the theoretical value of past behavior is based on its potential moderating role on the relationship between anticipated negative emotions and intentions, or how it changes the magnitude of the relationship between the two constructs. Baumeister et al. (2007) maintain that previous behavior and emotions can facilitate learning for future behaviors. When facing a time-2 behavioral choice, individuals can be influenced by the memory of the previous behavior and might engage in the "if-then" processing. Roese (1997) stated that the "if-then rules" are most often activated by negative emotions (vs. positive emotions) associated with performing a bad behavior or not performing a good behavior because negative thoughts or experiences signal to the individuals that there exists an acute problem. When encountering negative emotions, individuals engage in mental processing and consider how to avoid such situations in the future. Although previous behavior can recede into the past, it can still direct individuals to choose the course of action that helps them avoid the negative emotions. As a result, those who did not perform a good behavior and then experienced negative emotions were more likely than those who are satisfied to avail the opportunity to engage in the "if-then" processing and to use it to guide behavioral intentions (Patrick, Lancellotti, & Hagtvedt, 2009; Roese, 1997). Furthermore, Roese argued that when the outcome produces chronic negative consequences and thoughts, the influence of past behavior can be particularly strong. On the other hand, those who did not commit any wrongdoings may not engage in the "if-then" processing. However, in the previous studies of anticipated emotions, these individuals are still asked to anticipated negative emotions, which do not reliably guide their intentions.

Purposes

The present research first hypothesized that individuals' physical activity intentions were positively related to their attitudes

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