



Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior: Exploring How Attention to Social Media Influences Individuals' Intention to Purchase Green Agricultural Products in China

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Abstract. By applying the theory of planned behavior (TPB), this study explored how attention to social media influences individuals' intention to purchase green agricultural products via cognitive attitude, affective attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In addition, this study extended the theory of planned behavior by explicating attitude variables into two facets—cognitive attitude and affective attitude. Our study collected data from 304 participants in China by using a professional survey platform (Sojump), and the study found that attention to social media positively influenced with cognitive attitude and subjective norms, which, in turn, stimulated individuals' intention to purchase green agricultural products. However, social media attention did not significantly influence affective attitude and perceived behavioral control. This study provided suggestions for campaign designers on how to arouse individuals to purchase green agricultural products.

Keywords: the theory of planned behavior, attention to social media, green agricultural products

1 Introduction

As living standards continue to rise and health awareness increases, food security has become a more focused issue [1]. Traditional agricultural products can no longer satisfy the evolving demands of society. People are not just interested in satiating hunger—they also prioritize eating well and healthily. However, traditional agriculture often relies heavily on chemical fertilizers and pesticides in the production process, which can devastate soil structure, reduce fertility, and lead to environmental contamination. Residues from the use of fertilizers and pesticides during the cultivation of agricultural produce may remain. Residues from these chemicals may linger in agricultural produce and enter our bodies. Over time, this accumulation can pose an irreversible threat to our physical health. In China, where agriculture is a foundational industry, the risks associated with traditional agricultural practices present a significant challenge [3].

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Given the adverse effects associated with traditional agricultural products, academic attention has shifted toward green agricultural products. Numerous researches showed that green agricultural products adhere strictly to the principle of sustainable development during the production process, which minimizes the negative effects of agricultural activities on the environment [3]. Instead of using detrimental chemicals, green agricultural products rely on organic fertilizers and biological pest control methods to reduce soil and water pollution. In addition, the cultivation processes of green agricultural products attach great importance to the ecological balance, focusing on maintaining biodiversity and integrity of the ecosystem. For the sake of people's fitness and environmental sustainability, it is crucial to boost the consumption of green agricultural products.

Despite the numerous benefits associated with green agricultural products, existing studies indicate a low public willingness among people to purchase them. This reluctance may stem from several factors. Firstly, individuals lack a certain understanding of green agricultural products, which leads to their inability to hold a positive attitude toward purchasing green agricultural products. Secondly, a lack of normative influence that socially expects individuals to purchase green agricultural products results in their low subjective norms, which, in turn, influences their behavioral intention. Lastly, individuals may find it difficult to buy green agricultural products owing to the high price. Therefore, we are in urgent need of exploring how before people have the behavioral intention to buy green products, the underlying mechanism that people are based on works. If we are capable of getting a deep insight into people's psychological expectations, green products will have a better promotion and our life quality will be enhanced alike.

Media plays a key role in affecting individuals' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Initially, people mainly relied on traditional media for information acquisition and communicating with others. However, with the development of technology and its popularization and application for the public, social media has grown significantly during the past few years in China [4]. Nowadays, it is undoubted that social media has become the most fundamental tool for the public to communicate and obtain useful information [2]. Thus, we presume that when individuals pay more attention to social media, their attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are increased, and therefore enhance their behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products.

By applying the theory of planned behavior (TPB), our research intends to investigate individuals' psychological mechanisms behind their intentions of purchasing green agricultural products. TPB illustrates that human beings' behavioral intentions and behaviors are influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. For this purpose, we designed the TPB process model, which was extended by considering different attitude categories—cognitive attitude and affective attitude.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) was proposed first in 1985 by Ajzen [5] and it extended the theory of reasoned action (TRA). The TRA aims to explain how attitudes predict human beings' behavior in some specific areas, and the difference between TPB and TRA lies in the fact that TPB includes an additional factor that influences people's behavioral intention, perceived behavioral control [6]. TPB postulates three theoretical constructs, which are attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, usually can positively influence individuals' behavioral intentions [6]. To address the complexities of individuals' social behavior actions, TPB serves as a useful conceptual framework structure. Specifically, if they hold a positive attitude toward purchasing green agricultural products, perceive a strong social expectation of purchasing green agricultural products from significant others, and are capable of performing this action, individuals would be prone to take a specific action.

2.2 Cognitive Attitude and Affective Attitude

To date, TPB scholars proposed that the attitude construct includes cognitive and affective attitudes [7]. It is considered incorrect to evaluate attitude singly [9]. Just as negative cognitive attitude can offset positive affective attitude, a single-dimensional evaluation cannot fully capture the complexity of attitudes [8]. Besides, given the differences in cognitive and affective attitudes, it is integral to measure them in separate constructs. To align the TPB, our research aims to investigate deeply how social media attention affects human behavior intention through TPB, particularly via a special distinction between cognitive attitude and affective attitude.

Conceptually, attitude can be subdivided into two distinct components: cognitive and affective attitude [10]. Cognitive attitude refers to individuals' rational assessment of behavior-related personal outcomes [13], which involve a person's belief about an attitude object. On the other hand, affective attitude is a relatively complex and stable physiological evaluation and experience of attitude [29], which involves a person's feelings/emotions about the attitude object [14]. When individuals have either a positive cognitive or affective attitude, they are more inclined to perform the behavior of purchasing green agricultural products.

Several studies demonstrated that cognitive attitudes positively affect an individual's behavioral intention. For instance, Guo and Yu explored and explained which factors would influence individuals' intention to comfort young people who were spiritless via social media in 2024, and found that cognitive attitudes are significantly influencing behavioral intention [12]. Thus, we posited the hypothesis:

H1: Cognitive attitude toward purchasing green agricultural products can significantly influence the individual's behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products.

This research also provided evidence that affective attitude can significantly influence an individual's behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products. Guo

and Yu used TPB to explain which factors would influence individuals' intention to comfort young people who were spiritless via social media in 2024 and found that affective attitudes significantly influence behavioral intention [11]. Therefore, we proposed the following:

H2: Affective attitude toward purchasing green agricultural products can significantly influence the behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products.

2.3 Subjective Norms

Behavioral intention can be positively predicted by subjective norms [16]. Subjective norms refer to the social pressure individuals receive from significant others surrounding them. That is, subjective norms are perceptions of whether significant others expect that he or she will perform the behavior. TPB posits that individuals presume perceptions about what important others expect them to do [18], which means individuals will make their behavior more standardized by purchasing when they receive public pressure and social expectations.

Several studies demonstrated that subjective norms positively affect purchasing green agricultural products. For example, Ham conducted a study by collecting data from 411 household primary shoppers in the Southeast Europe region in 2015 and found that subjective norms could significantly influence green food purchasing intention [17]. In line with the above findings, we proposed:

H3: Subjective norms can significantly influence the behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products.

2.4 Perceived Behavioral Control

Past research demonstrated that perceived behavioral control forms people's behavioral intentions. Perceived behavioral control reflects a belief and a determination when individuals perform some specific behaviors, influencing decision-making and behavior across various domains of life [6]. It increases when individuals perceive having more resources and confidence to engage in the action [5].

Previous studies demonstrated that there was a positive association between perceived behavioral control and an individual's behavioral intention. For instance, Maichum studied 483 consumers in Thailand and found that perceived behavioral control has a direct influence on behavioral intention to purchase green products [19]. Thus, when feeling that they perceive a high perceived behavioral control to perform the behavior, individuals will have a higher behavioral intention. We posited the hypothesis:

H4: Perceived behavioral control can significantly influence the behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products.

2.5 Attention to Social Media as the Antecedent of TPB Constructs

In nowadays information environment, social media has become a main venue for individuals to access information [4]. Due to the important role that social media plays

in people's communication and information acquisition, we presumed that individuals' attention to social media may shape individuals' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, and thus affect individuals' behavioral intention.

2.6 Attention to Social Media and Attitude

In the age of social media, attitude may be shaped by an individual's attention to social media. Nowadays, there is a great amount of information regarding the benefits of purchasing green agricultural products on social media, such as using organic fertilizers that don't cause environmental pollution. Therefore, when people are highly engaged with social media, their cognitive attitudes are highly likely to be influenced. In addition, social media can create an active atmosphere to highlight green agricultural products, and thus provide people with a positive attitude, furthermore improving individuals' affective attitude.

Previous studies demonstrated a positive association between attention to social media and cognitive attitude. For instance, Yang and Wu explored how exposure to health information on social media influenced the protective health behaviors of Chinese individuals during air pollution in 2021, and found that attention to social media can positively influence cognitive attitude [20]. Therefore, we proposed the hypothesis:

H5: Attention to social media can significantly influence cognitive attitude.

A positive association between attention to social media and affective attitude has been found in past studies. For example, the influence of affective attitudes and cognitive attitudes on overall opinion was investigated for the new nanotechnologies and the study found that over time the proportion of affective and cognitive attitudes toward nanotechnologies has changed. So, this study showed that it is important to address public opinion of nanotechnology on both affective and cognitive aspects and found that media attention is positively associated with affective attitude [21].

Since the result from this study showed that attention to media made people's affective attitude more intense, given that nowadays individuals prefer to use social media in daily life, we can infer that individuals who pay more attention to social media will get a stronger affective attitude:

H6: Attention to social media can significantly influence affective attitude.

2.7 Attention to Social Media and Subjective Norms

Nowadays, social media has become an essential platform for people to obtain daily information and interact with others. It is also a primary part of facilitating the exchange of ideas, news, and personal experiences among people of geographical boundaries [22]. Many people have their own social media accounts on platforms, and significant others form a social media network surrounding them. When individuals pay attention to social media, they are highly expected by acquaintances on social media to purchase green agricultural products, and thus, individuals will perceive high subjective norms.

Previous studies demonstrated media attention can significantly predict subjective norms. For instance, Chi conducted a study regarding Chinese youth participation in

basketball in 2024, collecting data from 413 youth participants in China by using an online survey. The results showed that social media attention was positively associated with subjective norms [23]. Si Xie recruited 303 young people in China and explored how the green purchasing intentions of young people were influenced by social media in 2023, which ultimately demonstrated that social media has a positive impact on subjective norms [22]. Therefore, we suggested as follows:

H7: Attention to social media can significantly influence subjective norms.

2.8 Attention to Social Media and Perceived Behavioral Control

Perceived behavioral control represents individuals' ability to conduct a specific behavior [24]. Given the widespread popularity of social media and the vast amount of information it provides, it is obvious that green agricultural products are readily available to purchase online and the prices of these products are not as high as the public might have imagined, and therefore, people's perceived behavioral control to purchasing green agricultural products increases.

Previous studies demonstrated that there was a positive association between attention to social media and perceived behavioral control. For example, Anser investigated how attention to social media influenced individuals' behavior and intention toward adopting Bitcoin by collecting data from 443 respondents in China in 2022. Results showed that the usage of social media positively predicted user's perceived behavioral control [25].

Based on these findings, we argued that when individuals pay more attention to social media, they are inclined to hold a higher level of perceived behavioral control. Hence, we posited the hypothesis eight as follows:

H8: Attention to social media can significantly influence perceived behavioral control.

3 Method

3.1 Data Collection

By drawing upon Sojump, a professional data-collected platform in China, we recruited a number of 304 participants for the study. Before filling out our questionnaire, participants were provided with informed consent to ask for their agreement to participate in this survey. Of the 304 individuals, 34.9% were male ($n = 106$). There were 83.6% ($n = 254$) individuals with the age falling between 18 and 25, 8.5% ($n = 26$) individuals with the age falling between 26 and 40, and 7.9% ($n = 24$) were over 40 years old. The education level of these respondents was concentrated, 78.6% ($n = 239$) are undergraduate students, graduate students, and above.

3.2 Measures

Attention to social media. To measure participants' attention to social media, we adapted a scale from Lee in 2012 [26]. Participants were asked to rate how much attention (1 = no attention at all, 7 = very close attention) they paid to information about green agricultural products on social media. ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.36$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Cognitive attitude. To measure participants' cognitive attitudes, we adapted a scale from Jun and Arendt in 2016 [15]. Participants rated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) via three statements. One example item is, "For me, purchasing green agricultural products is worth participating." ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.26$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

Affective attitude. To measure participants' affective attitude, we adapted a scale from Jun and Arendt in 2016 [15]. Participants rated their affective attitude via the following dimensions: (a) negative/positive, (b) unpleasant/pleasant, (c) bad/good and (d) Unsatisfactory/satisfactory, on a seven-point Likert scale. ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.29$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$).

Perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control was measured using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) adopted by Shi and Zhao in 2017 [27]. One example item was, "I have enough time and money to purchase green agricultural products." ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.33$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

Subjective norms. Subjective norms were measured using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) adopted by Shi and Zhao in 2017 [27]. One example item was, "Whether your parents think that you will participate in purchasing green agricultural products." ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.26$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products. Behavioral intention to purchase green products was measured on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) adapted from Fielding in 2008 [28]. Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they were to purchase green agricultural products. ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.13$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

4 Result

We performed a model using Model 6 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS to deal with hypothesis questions. In this analysis, attention to social media was included as an independent variable, and behavioral intention to purchase green agricultural products was included as the dependent variable. Cognitive attitude, affective attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms were included as mediators.

Our result demonstrated that attention to social media significantly influenced cognitive attitude ($\beta = .49$ and $p < .001$) and subjective norms ($\beta = .40$ and $p < .001$), which supported H5 and H7. However, attention to social media didn't significantly influence affective attitude ($\beta = .02$ and $p = .66$) and perceived behavioral control ($\beta = .08$ and $p = .14$), which is not consistent with H6 and H8, respectively. In addition, cognitive attitude ($\beta = .10$ and $p = .03$), affective attitude ($\beta = .09$ and $p = .04$), subjective norms ($\beta = .50$ and $p < .001$), and perceived behavioral control ($\beta = .18$ and $p < .001$) signif-

icantly influenced the behavioral intention to engage in purchasing behavior, supporting H1, H2, H3, and H4, respectively.

5 Discussion

Our study aims to extend TPB by investigating the antecedent of attention to social media and distinguishing attitude into two subdimensions: cognitive attitude and affective attitude. First, the findings highlighted that attention to social media positively affected individuals' cognitive attitudes and subjective norms. Second, our study explored how cognitive attitude and affective attitude played an important role in the TPB. Specifically, attention to social media positively influenced cognitive attitude, which, in turn, positively affected individuals' behavioral intentions.

As hypothesized, cognitive attitude, affective attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control were found to have a positive association with behavioral intention. That is, people are inclined to engage in purchasing green agricultural products when they feel that is enjoyable and worthwhile to do and when their friends or acquaintances expect them to do so. This is not surprising since Ajzen found in 1991 that when individuals hold a more positive attitude, their behavioral intentions to perform a behavior would get stronger [6]. In alignment with previous studies (e.g., Maichum, 2016), subjective norms and perceived behavioral control can positively predict individuals' purchasing intention to buy green products [19].

Furthermore, our study demonstrated that social media attention significantly influenced cognitive attitudes and subjective norms. Individuals who paid more attention to social media were more likely to participate in purchasing green agricultural products when cognitive attitudes and subjective norms were high, compared with those who paid less attention to social media. In line with past studies (e.g., Chi, 2024), After examining the role of attention to social media in individuals' intention to perform basketball sports, the study found that social media attention was positively associated with attitude and subjective norms [23].

However, attention to social media was not significantly with affective attitude and perceived behavioral control. These unexpected findings are not surprising. One possible explanation could be that the affective attitude is a sentimental component, which is formed by long-term experience and becomes a deeper level of attitude. In addition, compared to cognitive attitude formed by directly obtaining factual knowledge and information online, affective attitude is more easily influenced by friends or acquaintances in the real world so it is relatively difficult to change by social media. As for perceived behavioral control, one possible explanation is that online dissemination of green agricultural products is not enough to convince the public that green agricultural products are not harmful to the human body, while there still are numerous people remain suspicious of the effect of organic products, and thus, the potential of social media to increase perceived behavioral control limited.

6 Contributions and Limitations

The study has both theoretical and practical contributions. As for theoretical implications, first, our research explored a new context, that is, this research explored the moderating effects of attention to social media on the relationship between affective attitude, cognitive attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intention to purchasing green agricultural products, and support the applicable of TPB in the context of purchasing green agricultural products. Second, attention to social media function is the antecedent of TPB. While only a few studies previous have examined the relationship between attention to social media and behavioral intention, thus it is extremely necessary to conduct research and examine the association between them. Third, we extend the TPB theory by explicating attitude variables into two facets—cognitive attitude and affective attitude, which made theoretical contributions to extend the TPB.

Practically, the findings of the study offered suggestions for future campaigns regarding the promotion of purchasing green agricultural products. The future propagation should be encouraged to expand the reach of the public on various social media platforms and to enhance individuals' social media attention, thus improving people's attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, and finally to increase purchasing intention.

However, our study is not without limitations. First, the participants of our research were mainly undergraduate students with the age falling between 18 and 25. Future studies should examine the proposed extended TPB using a more diverse sample. Second, our study only focused on social media attention. Although social media has evolved into a dominating platform for individuals to obtain information and interact with each other currently, many seniors are still inclined to use traditional media. Future studies should consider both attention to traditional and social media, to produce a more compelling and comprehensive research result.

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