

## **A Theoretical Framework for Integrating Symbolic and Affective Motivations in the Purchase Decisions of Romanian Car Consumers**

**Madalina Ariton (Balau)**

*,Danubius University of Galati, Romania, [madalina.balau@univ-danubius.ro](mailto:madalina.balau@univ-danubius.ro)*

**Abstract.** This paper aims to identify theoretical models on consumer behavior that could integrate the affective and symbolic components of goods, along with their functional aspects, into the choice process. The main research questions are: How important are the symbolic and affective purchase motives of a car for the Romanian consumers, compared with the functional motives? How each of the motives, instrumental, symbolic and affective, influences the purchase process, taking into consideration some external variables, as well? After shortly presenting the two models and their empirical applications, this paper proposes a combination of the two perspectives on the role of motivation on choice, in order to gain insights especially on the influence of affective and symbolic elements of the material possessions on the choice process, in our case of a passenger car. The innovative aspect of the paper is actually this combination, since it tries to bring together two quite diverging perspectives on consumers, their rational and less rational choices.

**Keywords:** *consumer behavior, MOA model, symbolic motivations, affective motivations, purchase decisions.*

### **1 Introduction**

119

The Romanian consumers have seen during the last two decades some major changes in their choice options and in their freedom of choice that were embraced with a lot of enthusiasm. Nevertheless consumers were also confronted with many disappointments and with unexpected contextual changes (Popescu et al, 2010), determined by the economic evolution and the influence of national and international crises. Yet, the decision process of the Romanian consumers was studied only within the usual assumptions of rational choice models. There are important parts of the critics to rational choice that were mainly ignored and the affective and symbolic components of consumption were rarely studied.

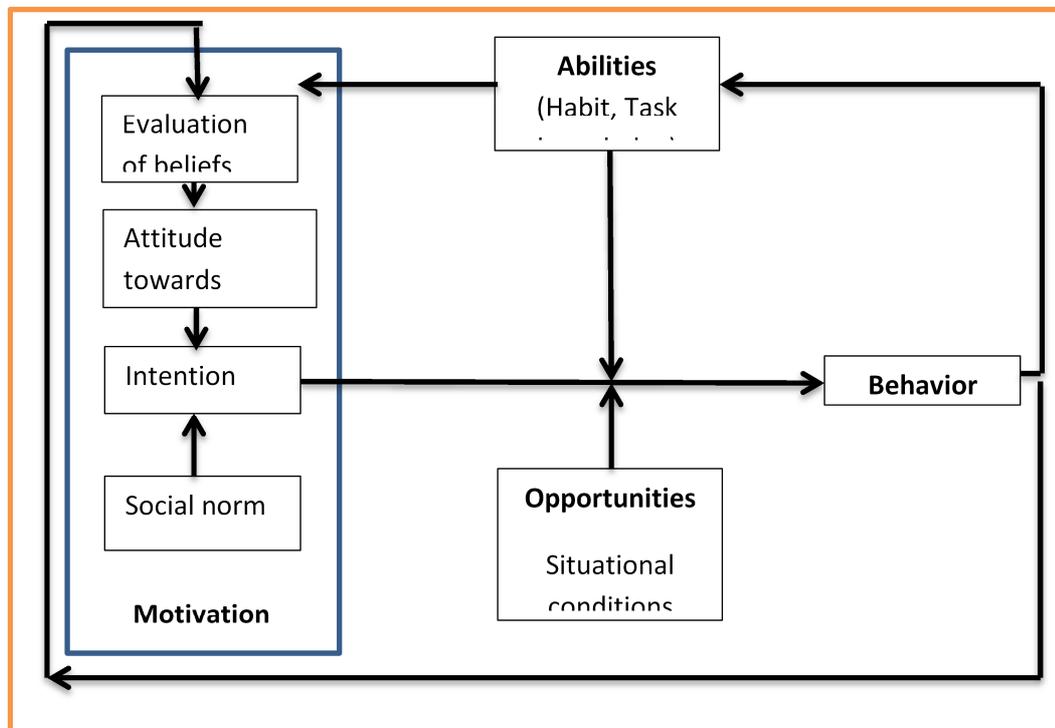
The aim of this paper is to propose a combined theoretical model on consumer choice that integrate the affective and symbolic components of goods, along with their functional aspects, into the choice process, and take into consideration internal and external variables to the consumer. The research questions derived from this purpose are: How important are the symbolic and affective purchase motives of a car for the Romanian consumers, compared with the functional motives? How each of the motives, instrumental, symbolic and affective, influences the purchase process? What is the influence of each motive on the perception of the contextual factors and own ability to buy the car? We have chosen the car market and car consumers in order to study these aspects for several reasons. First, there is a common assumption that Romanian consumers buy cars for emotional and symbolic reasons quite often, as a BMW sales representative said during an in-depth interview study: "Romanian consumer may suffer for its car, but he owns a BMW" (Ariton, 2012). But this assumption has never been tested empirically. Secondly, the existing research has shown that emotional and symbolic reasons of purchase are more frequent for some types of goods, and that there are gender

*CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK*

differences on the importance of these purchase motives according to the type of good. Dittmar (2008a) has shown that women are more inclined to emotional and symbolic purchase motives when we talk about clothes, and states that men are more inclined to these motives for good like tools. Yet, this second part still needs to be tested empirically.

## 2 Integrative Consumer Decision-making Models

A general issue in modeling consumer behavior is the distinction made by different theories between aspects internal to the individual, various psychological factors, and external aspects, but the connections and existing relations between these parts of reality were ignored most of the time. Trying to propose an integrative framework for consumers' action that could fill the gap between the two perspectives, Ölander and Thøgersen (1995) proposed the Motivation-Opportunities-Abilities model (MOA). As we're speaking of an integrative model, it tries to include both internal and external factors, but also has some common variables with the Theory of Reasoned Action proposed by Ajzen and Fischbein (1980). Ölander and Thøgersen (1995) admit that there is a correspondence between attitudes and behaviors but only under the precondition of a volitional control. But the authors also identify that the learning processes that take place once the choice is repeatedly made and the necessity of changing a behavior have not been addressed in previous models. In their application regarding behavioral change towards including the concern for the environment, the behavior prediction has been improved considerably with the inclusion as a moderator of the relationship attitude-behavior of the concept of abilities, on one hand, operationalized as including habit and task knowledge (Kok & Siero, 1985; Pieters, 1991) and, on the other hand, the concept of facilitating conditions or opportunities to perform the behavior. Thus, Ölander and Thøgersen (1995) suggest that a more suitable framework for studying consumer behavior change oriented would include at least three main determinants (or classes of determinants): motivation, abilities and opportunities, as presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Motivation-Opportunities-Abilities Model  
 Source: Ölander and Thøgersen (1995)

*The motivation* of a person to choose an action over another, according to a target goal is the first element of this model. The most famous approach to this concept in consumer behavior research is the Theory of Reasoned Action of Fishbein and Ajzen (1980). According to Ölander and Thøgersen (1995), this concept is conceived as a combination of two internal constructs – self-conception and the moral obligation to act – and two external variables, general normative beliefs and the role of social pressures.

*The ability* of a person to put into practice his/her intentions is the second component of the model. As it is suggesting Pieters (1991), the concept of abilities can be further operationalized using two factors: habit (Bagozzi, 1982; Triandis, 1979) and task knowledge (Verhallen & Pieters, 1984). Habit can be conceived as an independent determinant of behavior (Ronis et al., 1989) as well as a moderating variable for the link between intention and behavior (Bagozzi, 1992), or as having contributions in both ways (Triandis, 1979). The person's knowledge of the means of obtaining the intended result can as well influence this relationship (Verhallen & Pieters, 1984).

*The opportunity* factor has been conceptualized in consumer behavior research as a subjective as well as objective phenomenon. For Ajzen(1991) this is subjective and is named “perceived behavioral control” while for other authors this is external as the “situational variables” of Belk (1975), “facilitating conditions” of Triandis (1979), and the “structure of available alternatives” of Dholakia, Dholakia & Firat (1983). Ölander și Thøgersen (1995) preferred to see opportunities as objective preconditions of behavior.

The feedback arrows in Figure 1 suggest that beliefs about or evaluations of a certain activity changes with experience. A change can take place after the first trial (or trials) if expectations about costs and benefits were exaggerated – the direct arrow linking behavior to beliefs – or can take place after a while, when the learning process has made the task easier – the arrow linking behavior and beliefs through abilities, as intermediary.

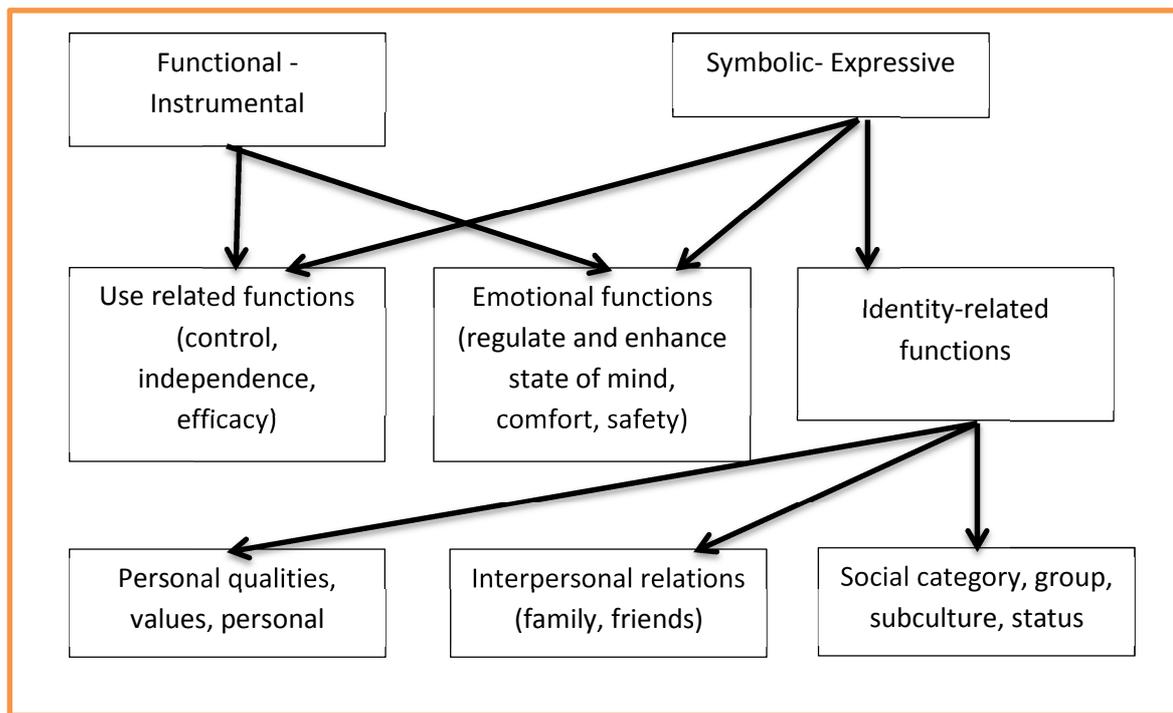
Taking now a perspective issued from social psychology, we will base our research ideas on the suggestion that material goods are involved in a series of psychological functions, such as offering them control, independence, pleasure and emotional security (Dittmar, 2008a). The symbolic links between material goods and identity are frequently used in advertising, and there is enough literature in the area of consumer behavior on the link between the product and self-harmony, or the goods characteristics and self-conception of the consumers (Sirgy et al., 1997; cf. Solomon, Bamossy, & Askegaard, 2002).

The psychological functions filled by material possessions have mainly been examined through qualitative research, using the “preferred possessions paradigm”, which requests the respondents to choose the most appreciated personal possessions and then to explain in their own words why those objects are so important to them (Dittmar, 2008a). The integrative model in Figure 2 offers an hierarchical map of the main types of psychological functions filled in by material possessions, that Dittmar (2008a) identified in content analysis open ended stories, in questionnaire based studies (Dittmar, Beattie & Friese, 1996) and in-depth interviews (Dittmar & Drury, 2000). The model firstly make a distinction between the instrumental and functional use of goods, in order to increase the efficiency of daily activities and to exert control over the environment, on one hand, and their symbolic use as expression mean of own identity, on the other hand.

At the next subordinate level, possessions have utility and emotional functions, which come from both superior levels, instrumental and symbolic. If we take the example of a car, the meaning referring to its usage combines its functionality as an instrument which enables transportation with the fact that for its owner it symbolizes freedom, independence and even sex-appeal. The predominantly symbolic functions of possessions can be further subdivided. First as symbols of category: signs of the social identity which enables people to express their social position, wealth and status, and symbolizes the

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

belongingness to a group. Secondly, possessions symbolize special relations with certain individuals, presents and family objects being good examples for such a case. Thirdly, they are also symbols of self-expression and work like marks of personal identity. They represent an instant picture of the personal history and memories, giving individuals a sense of continuity of the self. They can represent unique qualities of a person, its values and attitudes.



**Figure 2.** The model of psychological functions of material goods

Source: Dittmar (2008)

The perspective on the motives of usage for material goods can be translated into the context of purchase, allowing us to understand the way in which a multiple motivated behavior is enacted, providing also answers to questions related to the duration of the deliberation process and of the influence of the perceived external environment on the final decision.

### 3 Conceptual framework

The main part of the conceptual framework proposed is based on MOA model, and it introduces a modification in the motivation construct, in the sense that it will be conceived from the perspective offered by Dittmar’s model. Thus, the main variables will continue to be motivation, and behavior, with a direct relationship between them, and the abilities and opportunities as moderating variables for this direct relationship. The motivation construct will be conceived as formed by three components as proposed by Dittmar’s model: use related, emotional and identity related. This conceptual framework is presented in Figure 3.

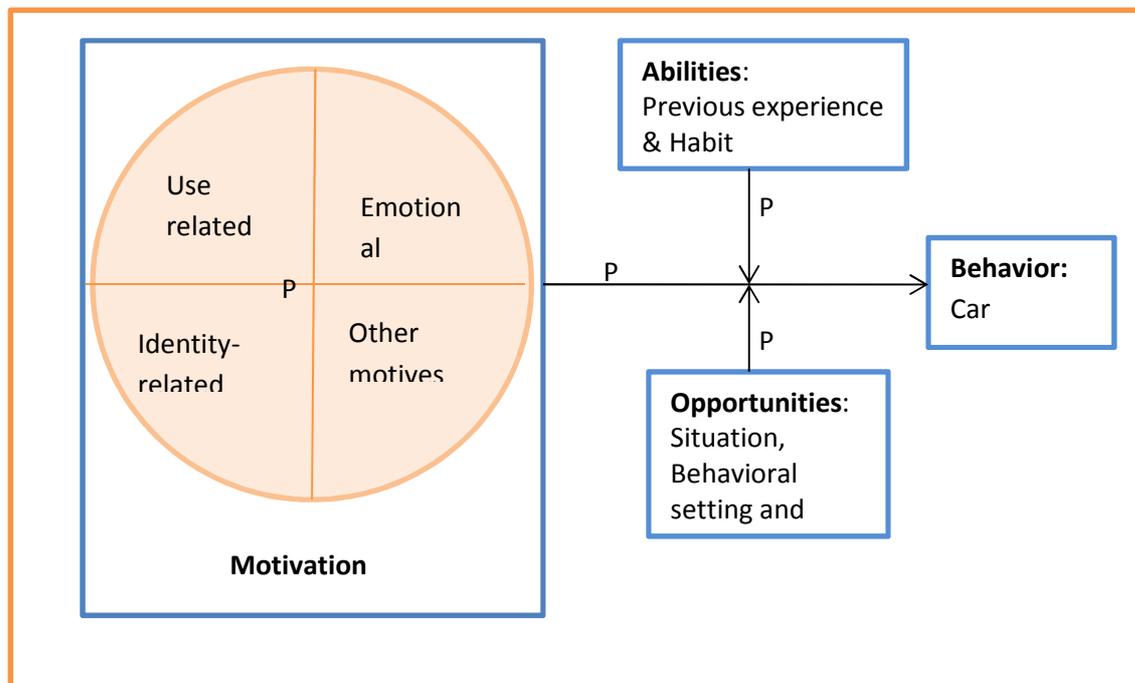
The overall perspective of this paper states that the different types of motives for purchasing a car have a direct influence on determining the purchase behavior. The motives may have an influence on

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

the deliberation period, on the preference for certain characteristics as well as on the way of perceiving own abilities to perform the given behavior and the contextual factors, identified through opportunities.

As we have chosen to measure the motivation according to its instrumental (use related), emotional and symbolic components, we have selected the middle level in Dittmar’s model. The motivation is represented in the shape of a pie with slices, comprising the three types of components we assume there are, and a fourth slice is termed “other motives”, with the purpose of identifying any other type of motive that could not be predicted by the previous studies. The slices were represented as equal parts of the circle, intending to signify that their proportion is unknown until the empirical measurement, and we assume it is different from a person to another. So, based also on the studies of Dittmar (2008) and Steg(2005) we came with the following proposition:

P1: The use related, emotional and identity-related motives of car purchase can be identified in empirical research and their proportion in the total motivation for purchasing a car can be measured.



**Figure 3.** Model proposition for purchase behavior integrating psychological motivations

As previous behavioral studies have identified, there is a direct relation between motivation and behavior. In the models of expected value the direct antecedent of behavior is the intention, but as proposed by Ajzen (1991) the whole process of intention formation depicts in fact the motivational factors. As for the motivation in our conceptual framework already identifies these motivational factors, then this concept will be the direct antecedent of behavior. This leads us the second proposition:

P2: The greater the whole motivation to purchase a car, the greater the probability to purchase a car.

The Abilities variable is moderating the direct relationship between motivation and behavior, and its components are previous experience in car purchasing, subjective knowledge, and a sense of

*CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK*

situational competence has been linked with ability (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; MacInnis et al., 1991). Our proposition for the Abilities variable is the following:

P3: The moderating effect of the abilities on the motivation-behavior relationship is different according to the proportion of the different components of the motivation: use-related, emotional and identity-related.

The Opportunities variable is also moderating this direct relationship between motivation and behavior, in quite a similar manner as the abilities, understanding that depending on the proportion on the psychological motivations opportunities can moderate more or less the relationship. This assumption that need further testing corresponds with the findings of Dittmar (2008b) study, where the psychological motives determine more purchases also depending on the purchase context (the shop). As we have seen from the study of Dittmar(2008b) the presence of psychological motives in shopping contexts can lead to overspending, which means that barriers to shopping are underestimated or ignored. Thus the model we will be using will allow us to see whether individuals who rate at higher scores the emotional or identity-related motives, will have the tendency to rate at a lower level the items measuring the opportunity, as we would assume from the literature study. The fourth proposition is:

P4: The moderating effect of the opportunities on the motivation-behavior relationship is different according to the proportion of the different components of the motivation: use-related, emotional and identity-related.

Although we admit that there is a feedback relationship between behavior and motivation, we consider that its measurement exceeds the purpose of the current research, but will be part of a follow-up study. For this reason we didn't keep the feedback arrows, even though our abilities variable will measure the part of feedback from behavior to abilities, through one of its components: previous experience.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The current study has enabled us to propose a model of consumer behavior that could integrate the psychological components of motivation (emotional and identity-related) along with the use-related ones, which are usually represented in these behavioral models. We identified two different theoretical models through the combination of which we could reach our aim, of understanding the influence of the psychological motives on the choice process. The innovative aspect of the paper is actually this combination, since it tries to bring together two quite diverging perspectives on consumers, their rational and less rational choices. The linking point of these two models consists of the motivational construct, and the next step in this endeavor will be to test the model and understand if the proposed relationships in this paper actually make sense in practice.

Considering now the context of the Romanian car consumer, we could say that these psychological motives are present if we look at some sales statistics or just look at the current passenger cars stock, but they have never been measured with the aim to identify them. It will be interesting to find out how important each of them are for certain brands more over others or for some personal characteristics present in some consumers. The testing of the model will also help us understand the influence of the psychological buying motives on self-perception (abilities) and contextual perception. A further reason in our support would be the fact that the models we have chosen from literature have only been tested in Western European countries, which have a long tradition in choosing products freely in the market, and who might have a different kind of pragmatism than people living in the Balkans and Eastern Europe which just waits to be discovered.

**5 References**

- Ajzen, Icek (1991), "The Theory of Planned Behaviour", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50, 179-211.
- Ajzen, I and M Fishbein (1980). *Understanding Attitudes and Predicting Social Behaviour*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Ariton (Balau), Madalina (2012), The Influence of Motivational Factors on the Romanian Passenger Car Consumer Behavior after the Start of the Current Economic Crisis – an Explorative Study, *EuroEconomica*, Vol. 31, Nr. 1, pp 25-31.
- Bagozzi, R.P. (1982), "A field investigation of causal relations among cognitions, affect, intentions and behavior", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 19, pp 562-584.
- Bagozzi, R.P. and Dholakia, U.M. (2002), "Intentional Social Action in Virtual Communities", *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 16(2): 2-21.
- Belk, R.W. (1975), "Situational variables and consumer behavior", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 2, 157-164.
- Dholakia, R.R., Fuat Firat, A. (1983), "From social psychology to political economy: A model of energy use behavior", *Journal of Economic Psychology* Vol. 3, Nr. 3-4, pp 231-247.
- Dittmar, H. (2008a), "To have is to be? Psychological functions of material possessions" In H. Dittmar, E. Halliwell, R. Banerjee, R. Gardardottir și J. Jankovic, *Consumer Culture, identity and well-being: the search for the "good life" and the "body perfect"*, Psychology Press.
- Dittmar, H., (2008b), "Consuming passions? Psychological motives for buying consumer goods", In H. Dittmar, E. Halliwell, R. Banerjee, R. Gardardottir și J. Jankovic, *Consumer Culture, identity and well-being: the search for the "good life" and the "body perfect"*, Psychology Press.
- Dittmar, H., Beattie, J., Friese, S. (1996), "Objects, decision considerations and self-image in men's and women's impulse purchases", *Acta Psychologica* (Special edition Decision-making and Emotions), Vol. 93, pp 187-206.
- Dittmar, H., Drury, J. (2000), "Self-image – is it in the bag? A qualitative comparison between ordinary and "excessive" consumers", *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 21, pp 109-142.
- Kok, G., Siero, S., (1985), "Tin recycling: Awareness, comprehension, attitude, intention and behavior", *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 6, Nr. 2, pp 157-173.
- MacInnis, D.J. and Jaworski, B.J. (1989), "Information Processing from Advertisements: Toward an Integrative Framework", *Journal of Marketing* 53 (October): 1-23.
- Ölander, F. and Thøgersen, J. (1995). "Understanding Consumer Behaviour as Prerequisite for Environmental Protection". *Journal of Consumer Policy* Vol. 18, pp 345-385.
- Pieters, R.G.M. (1991), "Changing garbage disposal patterns of consumers: Motivation, ability and performance." *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, Vol. 10, pp. 59-76.
- Popescu, C. Popescu, S.F., Stroe, C., (2010), "Consumul din perspectiva implinirii vietii umane", *Amfiteatru Economic*, Vol. XII, Nr. 28, pp 529-544.
- Ronis, D.L., Yates, J.F., & Kirscht, J. P. (1989), « Attitudes, decisions and habits as determinants of repeated behavior". In A.R. Pratkanis, S.J. Breckler, & A. Greenwald (Eds.), *Attitude structure and function*, pp. 213-239, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Sirgy, M.J., Grewal, D., Mangleburg, T.f., Park, J., Chon, K.S., Claiborne, C.B., Johar, J.S., Berkman, H. (1997), "Assessing the predictive validity of two methods of measuring self-image congruence", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 25, pp 229-241.
- Solomon, M.R., Bamossy, G., Askegaard, S. (2002), *Consumer behavior: A European perspective*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Pearson Education, Harlow, UK.
- Steg, L. (2005), "Car use: lust and must. Instrumental, symbolic, and affective motives for car use", *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, Vol. 39, Issues 2-3, pp 147-162.
- Triandis, H.C. (1979), "Values, attitudes and interpersonal behaviour", *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, Vol. 27, pp 195-259.
- Verhallen, T.M.M., Pieters, R.G.M. (1984), "Attitude Theory and Behavioural Costs", *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 5, pp 223-249.