

Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior to Examine University Students' Purchase Intention Toward Near-Expired Products: The Role of Media Persuasion

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the psychological and media-related mechanisms influencing university students' purchase intention toward near-expired products (NEPs) by extending the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Based on a survey of 504 students in China, structural equation modeling was used to test the relationships among attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, media persuasion, and purchase intention. The structural model equation results reveal that attitude, subjective norm, and media persuasion significantly predict purchase intention, whereas perceived behavioral control shows no significant effect. These findings confirm the applicability of TPB to sustainable consumption and highlight the crucial role of media communication in shaping pro-environmental purchasing decisions. Theoretically, this study enriches the TPB framework by integrating media persuasion as an external antecedent, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how media persuasion enhances consumers' environmental awareness and behavioral motivation. Practically, the results provide valuable implications for policymakers, enterprises, and universities to design effective media campaigns and educational strategies that encourage responsible consumption and reduce food waste among young consumers.

Keywords: Near-expired products; Theory of Planned Behavior; Media persuasion; Sustainable consumption; University students

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing severity of global climate change and environmental degradation, sustainable development has become a key priority worldwide. Among various sustainability strategies, reducing food waste plays a crucial role in combating climate change. As an emerging form of responsible consumption, green consumption helps lower carbon emissions in the consumption sector and contributes to the achievement of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality goals (M. Yang et al., 2020). Within this context, the consumption of near-expired products

(NEPs)—products that are approaching but have not yet reached their expiration date—has gained growing attention for its economic, social, and environmental value (Liang et al., 2024). Consuming NEPs can help conserve resources, reduce food waste, and promote sustainable development. However, even though these products remain functional and safe for consumption, many consumers remain skeptical due to concerns about food safety. As a result, they often reject or even discard near-expired food, leading to unnecessary food waste (Cheng et al., 2025). Enhancing the attractiveness of NEPs has therefore become increasingly vital for both corporate profitability and social responsibility.

Young people, particularly university students, play an important role in promoting NEP-related intentions and behaviors, as they must bear the consequences of past and present environmental neglect (Karimi et al., 2021). Moreover, this group often possesses the education, digital literacy, and expertise needed to design and implement effective solutions for sustainable change (Sousa et al., 2022). In the digital era, the rapid rise of social media has not only expanded the channels for interpersonal communication but also significantly influenced consumer purchasing decisions (Scopelliti et al., 2021). As heavy users of the Internet and social media, university students' media use behaviors are closely linked to their information acquisition, value formation, and consumption decisions (Ho et al., 2015). However, research focusing on university students' intentions and behaviors toward purchasing near-expired food remains scarce, representing a gap that warrants further exploration.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a robust psychological framework for predicting and understanding human behavior, particularly in the domain of purchasing and consumption decisions. It has been widely applied to explain various pro-environmental behaviors, including workplace sustainability practices, waste recycling, green purchasing, sustainable transportation, and energy conservation (e.g., Karimi et al., 2021; Li & Shan, 2025; Lim & An, 2021). Numerous studies have demonstrated the suitability of TPB in explaining green food purchase intentions and behaviors (Lim & An, 2021; Niloy et al., 2023). Nevertheless, limited attention has been paid to applying TPB to understand university students' intentions to purchase NEPs in the Chinese context. Therefore, this study adopts an extended TPB framework to investigate the mechanisms shaping university students' purchase intentions toward NEPs. The findings aim to offer practical implications for promoting healthy and sustainable consumption behaviors among university students, assisting enterprises in optimizing NEP marketing strategies, and providing evidence-based insights for policymakers and media practitioners. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to reducing food waste and fostering sustainable consumption patterns within the younger generation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The TPB and purchase intention toward NEPs

The TPB posits that behavioral intention is determined by three key components: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1985).

Attitude toward the behavior refers to an individual's overall evaluation—positive or negative—of performing a specific behavior. Generally, attitude and behavioral intention are positively associated; the more favorable an individual's evaluation of a behavior, the stronger their intention to perform it (Spínola, 2023). Conversely, when such beliefs weaken, behavioral intention also diminishes. Similar to other purchasing behaviors, the consumption of near-expired food can satisfy both the functional and psychological needs of university students. When this group holds favorable perceptions of near-expired food consumption experiences, they are likely to develop more positive attitudes toward such behavior, which in turn enhances their purchase intention and motivation.

Beyond individual attitudes, subjective norm captures the perceived social expectations and environmental pressures that influence consumers' purchase decisions (Zhan, 2022). In emerging economies such as China, rising environmental consciousness has amplified the influence of reference groups (e.g., family, friends, environmental advocates) and media promotion of food-saving values on consumers' green consumption behaviors (Ham et al., 2015). When individuals perceive stronger social pressure to protect the environment or a broader cultural trend advocating sustainable consumption, their intention to purchase near-expired food tends to increase. In contrast, weaker social influence may result in lower purchase intention.

Perceived behavioral control, refers to an individual's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing a particular behavior. Perceived behavioral control encompasses both control beliefs and the perceived ability to enact a given behavior (Britt et al., 2014). It plays a crucial role in shaping behavioral intention, when individuals believe they can easily carry out a behavior, they are more likely to take action and ultimately change their behavior. In the context of near-expired food, perceived control may relate to factors such as access to relevant information, perceptions of product safety, and the convenience of purchasing channels.

A considerable number of studies have demonstrated that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control jointly influence consumers' intentions to purchase green, eco-friendly, or near-expired food (Liang et al., 2024; Niloy et al., 2023; Sui et al., 2024). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Qi and Ploeger (2021) found that Chinese consumers' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly affected their green food purchase intentions. Similarly, Schmidt (2019) revealed that these three factors significantly influenced German consumers' intentions to purchase near-expired food. Drawing on the TPB framework and the above empirical evidence, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Attitude is positively related to purchase intention toward NEPs.

H2: Subjective norm is positively related to purchase intention toward NEPs.

H3: Perceived behavioral control is positively related to purchase intention toward NEPs.

Media persuasion and purchase intention toward NEPs

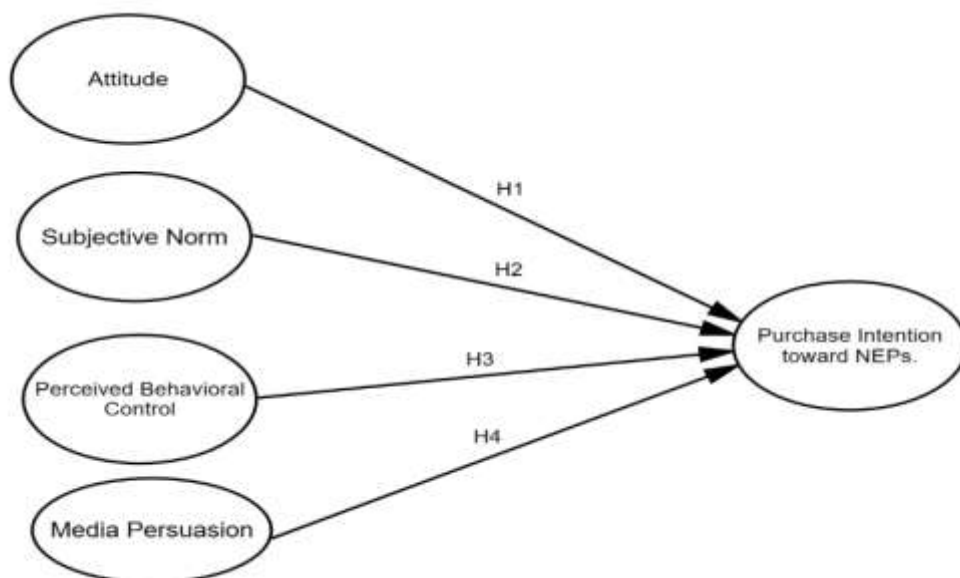
Media persuasion refers to the extent to which various media (e.g., electronic and social media) are used to expose environmental problems and guide audiences to change their environmental behaviors in the direction advocated by the media through specific persuasive appeals (Wei et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown that consumers acquire values, attitudes and behavioral patterns by observing different types of media, including social media (Ho & Yang, 2018; Jiang, 2022).

To reduce carbon emissions and promote green consumption, governments and enterprises frequently use media channels to disseminate persuasive messages that encourage consumers to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors. Prior research suggests that media exposure can effectively motivate sustainable actions (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). Similarly, Yang and Zhang (2020) found that persuasive media communication strengthens consumers' intentions toward green consumption, as repeated coverage of environmental crises increases individuals' perceived severity of environmental issues. Therefore, it is assumed that when individuals obtain more information about NEPs from the media, they are more likely to develop stronger purchase intentions toward NEPs. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Media persuasion is positively related to the purchase intention toward NEPs.

Drawing on the hypotheses, this study proposed the conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Theoretical framework



Method

Ethical approval was obtained from Guangzhou Nanfang College prior to the study. In May 2025, the questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms (TikTok, QQ, and WeChat) using a convenience sampling method. After excluding invalid responses, such as those failing the screening questions, completed in unusually short time, or showing excessive consistency, 504 valid questionnaires were retained, yielding an effective response rate of 93.1%. The survey comprised six sections: demographics (gender, age, education level, and income), media persuasion, attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and purchase intention towards NEPs. All non-demographic constructs were adapted from prior studies and measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; 1 = very unlikely to 5 = very likely).

Media persuasion was adapted from Wei et al. (2024), and measured using three items, such as “I often see information or topics about environmental problems on TV” (Mean = 3.415, SD = 0.526, Cronbach's α = 0.816). Attitude was adopted from Qi and Ploeger (2021) using three items; a sample item is “I think purchasing green food is a good concept” (Mean = 3.938, SD = 0.36, Cronbach's α = 0.816). Subjective norm was measured with a three-item scale, with a sample item being “I care about the attitudes of my family and friends towards near-expired food” (Mean = 3.454, SD = 0.282, Cronbach's α = 0.756). Perceived behavioral control was measured with a three-item scale, also adopted from Yadav and Pathak (2017), including the item “I have resources, time and opportunities to buy green product” (Mean = 3.958, SD = 0.285, Cronbach's α = 0.766). Purchase intention toward NEP was measured with three items (Xiong & Wang, 2020), such as “How likely are you to choose the near-expired food when buying food?” (Mean = 3.356, SD = 0.448, Cronbach's α = 0.883).

Data Analysis

Among the participants, 302 participants were female (60%) and 202 were male (40%), indicating a smaller proportion of males. Regarding age distribution, the largest group was aged 21–23 years (48.53%), followed by those aged 18–20 years (37.75%). In terms of academic year, freshmen accounted for 9.8%, sophomores for 25.49%, juniors for 19.12%, seniors for 37.75%, and graduate students 7.84%. Concerning monthly living expenses, the majority of participants reported 1,000–2,000 RMB (66.18%), while 11.76% reported less than 1,000 RMB, and 16.18% reported 2,000–3,000 RMB.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the construct validity and discriminant validity of the measurement model. The model fit indices indicated an acceptable fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.866$, GFI = 0.867, AGFI = 0.801, CFI = 0.904, TLI = 0.875, and RMSEA = 0.096. Cronbach's α values for all constructs exceeded 0.7, suggesting satisfactory internal consistency. Composite reliability (CR) values were above 0.7 and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.5, indicating good convergent validity (see Table 1).

Table 1 Construct Validity and Reliability Test (N = 504)

Variables	Items	β	CR	AVE	MEAN	SD	Cronbach's α
MP	MP1	0.776	0.818	0.604	3.415	0.526	0.816
	MP2	0.654					
	MP3	0.884					
AT	AT1	0.748	0.822	0.607	3.938	0.36	0.816
	AT2	0.821					
	AT3	0.766					
SN	SN1	0.774	0.762	0.517	3.454	0.282	0.756
	SN2	0.645					
	SN3	0.733					
CPB	CPB1	0.565	0.777	0.544	3.958	0.285	0.766
	CPB2	0.846					
	CPB3	0.772					
PB	PB1	0.900	0.887	0.725	3.356	0.448	0.883
	PB2	0.848					
	PB3	0.803					

Note: MP = media persuasion, AT = attitude, SN = social norm, CPB = perceived behavioral control, PB = purchase behavior.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, as shown in Table 2. The results indicated satisfactory discriminant validity, with each construct demonstrating a higher square root of its AVE than its correlations with other constructs.

Table 2 Discriminate validity test (N = 504)

Variables	AVE	PB	CPB	SN	AT	MP
PB	0.725	0.851				
CPB	0.544	0.397	0.737			
SN	0.517	0.568	0.295	0.719		
AT	0.607	0.679	0.728	0.403	0.779	
MP	0.604	0.662	0.394	0.526	0.593	0.777

Note: MP = media persuasion, AT = attitude, SN = social norm, CPB = perceived behavioral control, PB = purchase behavior.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the proposed hypotheses. The structural model demonstrated a good fit to the data: $\chi^2/df = 2.577$, GFI = 0.896, AGFI = 0.837, CFI = 0.925, TLI = 0.898, RMSEA = 0.088. As shown in Table 4, attitude was positively to the purchase intention toward NEPs, supporting H1. Subjective norm was positively associated with purchase intention toward NEPs, supporting H2. Perceived

behavioral control did not predict purchase intention toward NEPs; thus, H3 was not supported. Finally, media persuasion exerted a significant positive effect on purchase intention toward NEPs, supporting H4.

Table 4 Hypotheses Test (N = 504)

Hypotheses	Path	β	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
H1	AT→PB	0.299	0.115	2.811	0.005	Support
H2	SN→PB	0.285	0.112	3.473	***	Support
H3	CPB→PB	-0.045	0.203	-0.462	0.644	Not Support
H4	MP→PB	0.374	0.093	4.166	***	Support

Note: MP = media persuasion, AT = attitude, SN = social norm, CPB = perceived behavioral control, PB = purchase behavior. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

DISCUSSION

Key findings

The results indicate that attitude, subjective norm, and media persuasion significantly influence university students' purchase intention toward NEPs, whereas perceived behavioral control shows no significant effect. These findings provide empirical support for the applicability of the TPB in explaining pro-environmental consumption behaviors within the context of NEPs.

First, the significant positive effect of attitude suggests that when university students perceive purchasing NEPs as an economical, environmentally friendly, and socially responsible behavior, they are more likely to form strong purchase intentions (Cheng et al., 2025). This aligns with prior studies emphasizing the pivotal role of positive attitudes in promoting sustainable consumption intentions.

Second, the significant effect of subjective norm underscores the importance of social influence and peer pressure in shaping young consumers' sustainable purchasing behaviors (Lee, 2010). In a collectivist cultural context such as China, individuals are more likely to conform to social norms and the opinions of significant others (Zhan, 2022). This finding reinforces previous research indicating that perceived social expectations strongly predict pro-environmental behavioral intentions.

Third, media persuasion exerts a significant positive influence on purchase intention, confirming that external communication stimuli play a critical role in raising consumers' environmental awareness and sense of responsibility. Exposure to persuasive environmental messages through social media may increase individuals' perceived importance of food conservation and consequently enhance their willingness to purchase NEPs. This finding is consistent with Wei et al. (2024), who found that media persuasion to environmental information significantly strengthens consumers' environmental attitudes and social norm identification.

Interestingly, perceived behavioral control did not significantly predict purchase intention. This result may be explained by both theoretical and contextual factors. According to the TPB, perceived behavioral control has stronger explanatory power for behaviors that require substantial ability or resources. However, purchasing near-expired products is a relatively low-effort behavior, and thus consumers' willingness, rather than their perceived capability, becomes more decisive. Moreover, within the Chinese collectivist context, social and moral norms often outweigh individual efficacy in shaping behavioral intentions (Chan & Lau, 2002). Drawing on the Value–Belief–Norm theory, students may be more motivated by moral obligations and social approval than by their perceived control (Wang et al., 2024). Additionally, concerns about product freshness and safety may weaken

their sense of control, consistent with the Protection Motivation Theory, which posits that perceived risks can reduce behavioral intention even when individuals feel capable.

Implications

This study extends the TPB by introducing media persuasion as an external factor, enhancing theoretical understanding of how media communication shapes consumers' attitudes, norms, and behavioral intentions. By applying TPB to the context of NEPs, a relatively neglected area in sustainable consumption research—the study demonstrates that TPB effectively explains consumers' environmentally responsible yet safety-conscious purchasing behaviors. Moreover, the nonsignificant effect of perceived behavioral control reveals that contextual constraints, such as safety perceptions and product availability, may limit TPB's predictive power. These findings suggest the need to refine TPB by incorporating contextual and emotional variables. Overall, the study enriches TPB-based sustainability research and underscores the media's vital role in promoting pro-environmental consumption.

Practically, this study provides important insights for universities, policymakers, and enterprises. Universities can integrate sustainability education into courses and social media platforms to encourage students to practice environmental responsibility by purchasing NEPs. Governments can leverage media campaigns to promote awareness of food waste reduction and foster a social atmosphere of green consumption. Enterprises should emphasize the safety, quality, and value of NEPs in their marketing communication to build consumer trust and enhance purchase intention. Meanwhile, media organizations can strengthen public environmental awareness through targeted content strategies. Collectively, these efforts can create a collaborative green communication ecosystem that promotes resource conservation and sustainable consumption.

Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be noted. First, the data were collected from university students in a single country, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could include more diverse samples across regions and cultures. Second, the study focused on psychological and media-related factors while overlooking potential economic and policy influences that may also shape consumers' purchase decisions (Yadav & Pathak, 2017). Lastly, the self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias, and future research could employ behavioral experiments or longitudinal tracking to validate the robustness of the results.

CONCLUSION

This study applied an extended TPB framework to investigate the psychological and media-related mechanisms underlying university students' purchase intentions toward near-expired products. The findings demonstrate that attitude, subjective norm, and media persuasion significantly predict purchase intention, while perceived behavioral control shows no significant effect. These results suggest that consumers' intention toward NEPs is primarily shaped by social and moral norms, as well as persuasive environmental communication, rather than by perceived capability. Theoretically, the study extends TPB by incorporating media persuasion as an external antecedent, enriching understanding of how media communication drives pro-environmental consumption

behaviors. Practically, it highlights the importance of leveraging media campaigns, enhancing social approval, and improving consumer trust in product safety to promote sustainable consumption. Overall, by revealing the interplay between psychological, social, and media factors, this research provides a valuable foundation for developing effective communication and policy strategies to reduce food waste and encourage responsible consumption among young consumers.

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Contributor ship:

BaoJing Cai: conceptualized and designed the study, analyzed the data, drafted the manuscript

QianYing Ma: conceptualized and designed the study, drafted the manuscript

YuTong Chen: drafted the manuscript, methodology, distributed the questionnaire

All the authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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