

Students' Intention to pursue a career in Accounting from the Perspective of the theory of Planned Behavior

Abstract

Objective: What are the students' intentions related to the profession and, consequently, their career when taking the undergraduate course in Accounting? In view of the diverse options the professionals of the area have in the market, this study investigates the factors that influence the behavioral intention of the students in all phases at a federal university of the South of Brazil to follow a career in the accounting area, in the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior.

Method: Data collection was performed through a questionnaire applied to 302 students. For the analysis of the data, we used descriptive statistics, factorial analysis and Structural Equations.

Results: The results obtained emphasize that the opinions of professionals in the area, friends and partners are relevant for this decision. It is also inferred that the students do not see the careers of the accounting profession accompanied by acknowledged status and prestige; that remunerations are not good; and that there are no good opportunities available in the market.

Contribution: The research results contribute to clarify factors that can significantly influence the students' intention to pursue a career in the area they study in, and may also provide inputs on aspects that need to be improved to stimulate students' interest.

Key words: Profession, Career, Theory of Planned Behavior, Accounting.

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1. Introduction

In the decision-making process on which profession or career to pursue, many young people encounter difficulties, as there are new and stressful situations to be overcome (Safta, 2015). Choosing a profession involves a decision that may affect the future of the individual forever, making it necessary to think about it, considering all the information necessary for a conclusion about which profession and career to follow. Marion (2006) argues that a poorly made important decision can be detrimental for life, and therefore requires greater care and in-depth analysis of the items to be considered.

Nunes (2014) emphasizes that the individual is in conflict with his interests and aptitudes when he has to decide on something important, such as the professional decision. Gonzaga (2011) states that this process is multifactorial and very complex and, as these factors dominate the concerns of adolescents before making the decision, they can turn into worrying symptoms of stress. Thus, it is indicated that young people choose their profession early, even if they do not yet have an identity formed, taking into account that the choice will be definitive and will accompany them for life (Almeida & Pinho, 2008).

Thus, it is conjectured that many young people receive several influences in daily life that allow them to reach the moment of choosing the profession and consequently the career, with some maturity on the subject. In this regard, Byrne, Willis and Burke (2012) argue that many young students begin to make career choices at a relatively early stage of their lives, having fulfilled many of their educational and occupational aspirations by the time they complete their school education.

The undergraduate course the student chooses does not always determine what career he will follow in the job market though, as some people choose occupations different from the options made possible by the university curriculum, or they do not follow the course until the end, leading to drop-out. Thus, these and other aspects give rise to empirical research that seeks to understand and explain the factors that influence people in their career choice. In this regard, Bomtempo (2005) mentions that the reasons that determine students' course or career choice have been evaluated in career guidance and career development studies, together with a specific area of activity or for a set of areas, and with students in different stages.

In the Accounting area, career choice has been attributed to many factors. In the current context, the new challenges bring concerns, as economic development is based on decisions that are taken fundamentally based on information generated and provided by accounting professionals (Mbawuni & Nimaiko, 2015). For Byrne, Willis and Burke (2012), the accounting profession needs to be highly competitive in relation to the others in attracting qualified students, and the best way to achieve this is by understanding the factors that determine students' career choices.

Marion (2006) presents some career options in the area of Accounting, such as: general accountant, cost accountant, controller, subcontractor, internal auditor, tax accountant, among others. Thus, as the profession has several options to be followed, there is a need to identify the reasons that lead the accounting student to follow, or not, a career in that area.

Therefore, based on the attitudinal, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control factors, the research question proposed for this study is: **What is the intention of the students of the Accounting course at a federal university in the South of Brazil to pursue a career in Accounting?** Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the intention of the students of the Accounting course at a federal university in the south of Brazil to pursue a career in accounting, with the theoretical support of Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

The justification for the elaboration of this work rests on three main pillars, according to Castro (1977): importance, originality and feasibility. This research is important because, after identifying the factors that lead students to choose or refuse to pursue one of the careers in Accounting, the results can provide insights on the aspects that need to be improved in order to stimulate interest in the various careers, beyond that of accountant. Its originality is due to the fact that research on the careers in the accounting area in Brazil is still incipient, mainly using theories in the field of Psychology and Statistical Techniques. The feasibility of the work is due to the fact that, first, the researchers get involved in the theme and the data were collected without additional cost. Another justification is the interest in investigating the intention of students in all academic phases of the Accounting course. This interest is in line with the fact that, at Higher Education Institutions (HEI), little attention is paid to intentions, behaviors and attitudes necessary for students to take up their professional role (Shinyashiki, Mendes, Trevizan & Day, 2006). In addition, this study complements the research by Santos and Almeida (2018), which investigated the intention of 691 graduating students from the State of Paraná, separated in samples corresponding to the ten mesoregions of the state (criterion of Paraná Institute for Economic and Social Development - IparDES) to pursue a career as an accountant. Among the findings, the authors confirmed differences among the samples of the mesoregions, possibly justified by geographical, economic and population factors, among others.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

2.1 Theory of Planned Behavior

The behavior of the human being is defined in several ways, and most of the existing theories emphasize the individual as a locus, which can suffer impacts from external factors that generate competing influences, but whose final decision is given by the subject (Morris, Marzano, Dandy, & O'Brien, 2012). The theories used to predict behavioral intentions include the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which is an extension of the Theory of Rational Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

TRA originated in the 1960s with Fishbein's (1963, 1967) studies and admits that humans are rational and use the available information, assessing the implications of their behaviors in order to decide on their achievement (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In this sense, TRA assumes that external variables, such as behavioral traits, general attitudes and demographic variables, are related to behavior, and this relationship is mediated by the rational use of information (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Behavior is understood when the determinants of behavioral intentions are identified: attitudes, which relate to the personal aspect; and subjective norms, which refer to social influence (Moutinho & Roazzi, 2010).

TRA predicts that the subject's intention in performing the behavior will be greater insofar as his or her assessment of the behavior is more positive (attitudes), and insofar as he or she realizes the approval of the people who are important to him about the accomplishment of this behavior (subjective norm) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Nevertheless, ART has been questioned for not considering factors that are likely to influence the intentions and behavior of individuals. Thus, Ajzen (1991) developed TPB as a continuation of the development of TRA, adding the variable "perceived behavioral control" in an attempt to understand the individual's limitations to perform certain behaviors (Solikhah, 2014).

TPB, like other theoretical models created to predict human behavior, is focused on behavioral intention because it is the direct variable that precedes the actual behavior. Therefore, the TPB model has three variables, being (i) attitude and (ii) subjective norms derived from TRA, and (iii) behavioral control, perceived as the variable that favored the extension of TRA.

Ajzen (1991) developed TPB based on the premise that three types of beliefs that underlie the model variables (attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control) define human behavior. The beliefs are as follows: (i) behavioral beliefs, which relate to the likely consequences of a behavior; (ii) normative beliefs, related to the expectations of third parties; and (iii) control beliefs about factors that prevent or facilitate the performance of a behavior. Thus, the three variables together, being or not, under volitional control, predict the intention with respect to the actual behavior.

In the context of this study, the three variables (attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control) are directly related to the intention of the students in the undergraduate course in Accounting to pursue a career in accounting. According to the TPB model, attitude is defined as an individual's positive or negative feelings towards the action to be performed and is determined by the assessment of beliefs about the consequences of the behavior and the opportunities of these consequences (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Solikhah, 2014). It is observed that, the greater the students' intention to pursue a career in accounting, the more positive will be their evaluation of this action. Thus, the first research hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

H1: The attitude positively influences the intended behavior of the students at a federal university in the South of Brazil to pursue a career in Accounting.

The second variable of TPB is related to the individual's perception of the opinion of the people that are important to him in relation to the behavior that should or should not be performed (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Solikhah, 2014). Thus, if the individual realizes that the people who are important to him feel they should pursue a career in accounting, their intention to do so will automatically be greater. Based on the second variable of the model, the second research hypothesis is:

H2: The subjective norm positively influences the intention of the students at a federal university in the South of Brazil to pursue a career in Accounting.

The third variable of TPB (perceived behavioral control) refers to factors that may facilitate or impede behavioral performance (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, if the students realize that there will be resources and opportunities that facilitate the activities related to their functions in the accounting career, their intention to pursue this career will be stronger. Thus, the third research hypothesis is: H3: The perceived behavioral control positively influences the intention of the students at a federal university in the South of Brazil to pursue a career in Accounting.

2.2 Profession and career choice

The professional trajectory of a person is marked by a very important decision, which is the choice of the profession/career, a process that begins very early in the individual's life (Palos & Drobot, 2010). Safta (2015) argues that choosing a profession is a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, in which young people need to project themselves to build their future life. According to Gonzaga (2011), professional interests are important aspects in the professional trajectory of adolescents, and there is a need for studies to investigate and map the processes of insertion, performance, continuation in courses and prevention of drop-out.

Concerning the definition of the terms profession and career, Tolfo (2002) points out that, within organizations, the term career is generally associated with both occupation and profession. In this sense, the terms are commonly mixed up by treating them as synonyms, despite being words with different meanings. Given this aspect, Nunes (2014) argues that, because they are related to work, profession and career, they generate the idea of a single concept and end up being confused. In view of the above, it is important to note the difference between the two so that one can analyze the impact of one and the other on the individual's life.

The define profession, Nunes (2014) emphasizes that, in order to be understood as such, it needs specific knowledge and more intense preparation, having a working relationship, some of which allow its independent execution, without the need for employment, which are classified as liberal professions. On the other hand, the definition of career, according to Chanlat (1995), is something recent, having arisen in the course of the 19th century with the liberal industrialist capitalist society. According to the author, career advancement takes place within the professional discipline, as knowledge and experience accumulate and, therefore, the person who learns and gains qualification can grow in the profession. For Tolfo (2002), in the capitalist society, the career is associated with success and social ascent, whose trajectory takes place as a path to be pursued professionally, allowing for progress in positions over time.

Therefore, although the terms “profession” and “career” do not have the same meaning, a career can be influenced by the choice of profession. Teixeira and Gomes (2005) emphasize that, in the decision to follow a certain career, individuals need to be able to identify their interests within the profession, establishing their professional goals and drawing an action strategy to reach them. From the perspective of Alnaçık, Alnaçık, Akçin, and Erat (2012), the individual identifies with the career insofar as there is the involvement of organizational and professional work, also relating the degree of immersion in the activities linked to his function within the organization, demonstrating the need for advancement and promotion.

Nevertheless, not always the profession defined in the choice of undergraduate course is the same in which the individual pursues his professional career. The reasons that influence the choice of profession and career have been studied mainly in the field of psychology, leading to approaches related to the theme. In this regard, Bomtempo (2005) mentions that the psychological factors involved in the process of choice and professional adjustment are explained by the theories framed in this approach, which establish these phenomena as individual linked to the subject's characteristics.

Regarding the difficulty to make the decision, Safta (2015) mentions that the students feel insufficiently prepared for the orientation process and consider the career choices an extremely difficult process; this is because, in the choice of profession, in addition to individual interests and aptitudes, the way he sees the world and sees himself is also at stake, what he knows about the professions and external influences (Almeida & Pinho, 2008). In addition, the choice of the profession can also be influenced by factors such as home incentives, school incentives, peer and community expectations, etc.

The factors influencing the choice of the profession have been the focus of many studies in a wide range of areas, in the framework of social and behavioral psychological theories. Carpenter and Foster (1977) point out intrinsic, extrinsic and interpersonal factors as influential in the choice of profession and career. Bomtempo (2005) lists the social class, the educational and cultural, professional and work qualification opportunities, family, religion, and other value transmitting agents as vocational determinants in the choice of profession and career.

In the context of Accounting, according to Demagalhães, Wilde and Fitzgerald (2011), the intrinsic factors are related to satisfaction due to the opportunity to work in a dynamic and challenging environment that stimulates the accounting professional's creativity, while the extrinsic factors are associated with employment safety, career perspective, wages and benefits. The authors further highlight the existence of other factors that may include professional experience, employer location, proximity to the family, etc.

For Mbawuni and Nimako (2015), the degree of recognition and respect for careers in accounting defines the reputation of the profession. Byrne, Willis, and Burke (2012) argue that the accounting profession needs to be highly competitive in attracting qualified students, and the best way to do this is by understanding the factors that determine students' career choices. Andon, Chong and Roebuck (2010) argue that the role of the accounting professional is to solve the problems of companies and this is one of the main motivators for the student to pursue or not a career in accounting, so that new characterizations of professionals in the area are increasingly oriented to the search for skills desirable for members of the profession.

In this sense, Marion (2006) describes that professionals who pursue a career as an accountant cannot maintain the mere position of bookkeeper, whose functions are summarized in bureaucratic activities. According to the author, the professional needs to be constantly evolving and possess indispensable attributes in the various specializations of the accounting profession.

Among some sectors in which the accounting activity can be applied and some career options for the graduates in Accounting, Marion (2006) lists the following:

Table 1

Career options for Accounting graduates

In companies	Self-employed	In teaching and research	In public entities
General accountant	Independent auditor	Teacher	Public accountant
Cost accountant	Consultant	Researcher	Tax inspector
Controller, subaccountant	Accounting service provider	Writer	External agent and/or technician in audit offices
Internal auditor		Speaker	
Tax accountant	Accounting Expert		
International accountant			

Source: adapted from Marion (2006).

It is observed, therefore, that for the professional graduated in Accounting, the area offers many career options, but the individual needs to identify with some of them in order to make the right choice. Regarding this aspect, Safta (2015) argues that the individual should reflect on himself, his interests, aspirations and desires, as well as his fears, anxieties and doubts, in order to find the emotional control that will permit effective career management. In the same sense, Bardagi and Paradiso (2003) contextualized that the individual's personal identity is complemented by the professional identity, and the choice is evaluated as good or bad according to the way it was taken and the cognitive and affective consequences it produces.

According to the above, the model with the constructs and the hypotheses proposed is summarized in Figure 1.

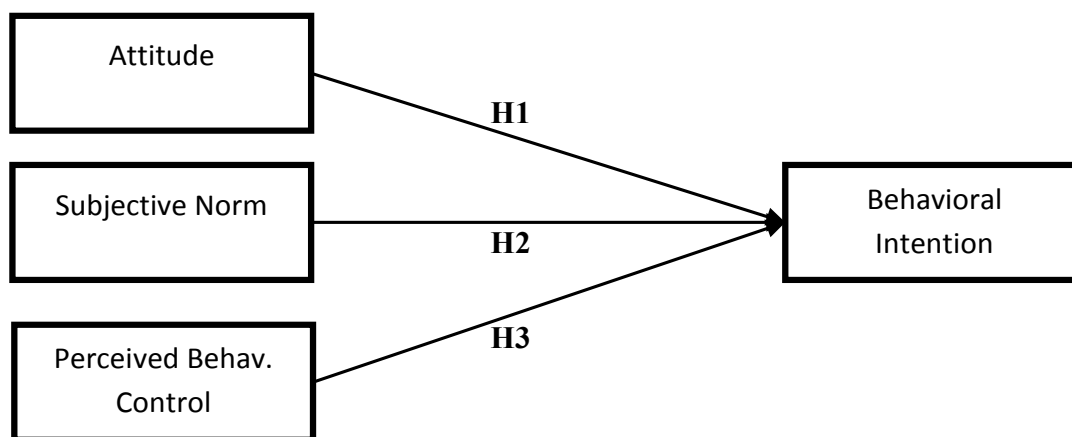


Figure 1. Proposed Theoretical Model and Research Hypotheses
Source: the authors.

In this context, the behavioral intention of the Accounting students to pursue a career in Accounting was investigated, using the TPB model and trying to confirm the results, or not, of each hypothesis listed, thus surveying the individuals' perception of the investigated behavior.

3. Method

This research is characterized as descriptive, performed through a survey. The total population consists of 435 students in all phases of the Accounting course, duly enrolled in 2015 at a federal university in the South of Brazil. The final sample resulted in 302 valid respondents, that is, 69.43% of the population.

The questionnaire was composed of 40 assertions, 25 of them consisting of a 7-point Likert scale, partially anchored, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree. We adopted the random presentation of the assertions among the constructs and 3 of them were described in a reverse way to test the respondents' attention when answering the instrument.

The applied research instrument was based on several studies according to: Attitude (Gul, Andrew, Leong & Ismail; Cohen & Hanno 1993; Felton *et al.* 1995; Ahmed, Alam & Alam; Albrecht & Sack 2000; Byrne & Willis 2005; Jackling & Calero 2006; Tan & Laswad 2006; Hutaibat 2012; Mbawuni & Nimako 2015); Subjective norm (Paolillo & Estes 1982; Tan & Laswad 2006; Byrne; Willis & Burke 2012; Peltier, Cummins, Pormirleanu, Cross & Simom; Mbawuni & Nimako 2015); Perceived Behavioral Control (Auyeung & Sands 1997; Sugahara & Boland 2006; Karakaya, Quigley & Bingham 2011; Peltier *et al.* 2014; Mbawuni & Nimako 2015) and intention (Ajzen 1991; Azevedo & Sugahara 2012; Mbawuni & Nimako 2015). It should be emphasized that this instrument was validated in Brazil in the research by Santos (2016) and Santos and Almeida (2018). For the data collection, the research instrument was delivered in person to the students, in the classroom, on October 28, 2015.

For the treatment of the data, initially, descriptive statistics were used to characterize the social and economic profile of the sample studied, followed by factorial analysis and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Klem (1995) considers SEM as an extension of multiple regression as, in the regression, a single dependent variable is predicted whereas, in structural equation modeling, there is more than one dependent variable. According to Hair Jr., Black, Babin, Anderson and Tathan (2009), this multivariate statistical technique can be used to elaborate models and also act in a complementary way to traditional statistical methods.

The SEM is classified in two types: i) structural equations modeling based on covariance or LISREL model; and (ii) Partial Least Squares (PLS) (Bido, Silva & Souza, 2010). The LISREL approach seeks to test theoretical models, while PLS focuses on the construction of theoretical models in an exploratory perspective (Bido *et al.*, 2010). In this research, the PLS technique was used through SmartPLS version 2.0 for processing.

4. Description and Analysis of Results

In order to answer the research question, the empirical results reached in the study are presented and discussed. Initially, the students' profile is described through descriptive statistics, followed by data evaluation procedures, Factorial Analysis and Structural Equations Modeling.

4.1 Respondents Profile

Table 2 shows the demographic data of the respondents, categorized by (i) Gender, (ii) Age group, (iii) Marital status, (iv) Year of course, (v) Work and (vi) Income.

Table 2

Respondents' Data

Gender	N	(%)	Age	N	(%)
Female	169	55.96	16 till 25	218	72.19
Male	133	44.04	26 till 35	75	24.83
			36 till 45	9	2.98
Total	302	100.00	Total	302	100.00
Marital status	N	(%)	Course yearso	N	(%)
Married	36	11.92	1st year	61	20.20
Divorced	7	2.32	2nd year	81	26.82
Single	259	85.76	3rd year	89	29.47
			4th year	71	23.51
Total	302	100.00	Total	302	100.00
Work	N	(%)	Income	N	(%)
Not working	46	15.23	Up to 2 MW	120	39.74
Work in acc. area	156	51.66	Up to 3	52	17.22
Work not in acc. area	100	33.11	Up to 4 MW	35	11.59
			Up to 5 salários	26	8.61
			More than 5	23	7.62
			None rendimento	46	15.23
Total	302	100.00	Total	302	100.00

Source: research data

Considering the respondents' data, the following profiles were found: 55.96% female (n = 169) and 44.04% male (n = 133). The majority was born between 1990 and 1999, that is, they are between 16 and 25 years old (72.19%) at the date of data collection. Regarding the marital status, 85.76% of the sample responded being single, that is, 259 students. As for the year of the Accounting course, respondents from the 3rd year were the most representative with 29.47%; followed by the second year with 26.82%; the 4th year with 23.51%, and at the end of the 1st year with 20.20%.

Regarding the students' work, they were asked whether or not they were working. 84.77% of the sample were currently professionally engaged. Of these, 51.66% work in Accounting and 33.11% do not. The remainder, 15.23%, claimed not to be working at the time. In addition to the previous question, personal income was questioned, evidencing that 39.74% of the total sample gained up to 2 minimum wages, that is, 120 students receive up to R\$ 1576.00. Next are those with gains up to 3 and 4 minimum wages (52 and 35 individuals, respectively).

When asked about previous courses, that is, if the respondents had already taken another degree, among the 302 students, 226 were attending Accounting as their first degree. Another 64 students were attending their second graduation, as follows: Administration (n = 18); Law (n = 11); Biology and Interior design (n = 2 each); and one person each for: Systems Analysis; Economics; Physical Education; Nursing; Production engineering; Civil Engineering; Pharmaceutical Sciences; Information management; Financial management; Journalism; Languages; Nutrition; Dentistry; Psychology, Chemistry; Radiology; International Relations Secretariat. The remaining 12 students did not complete their other undergraduate courses.

As influential factors for the investigated students to choose to take Accounting, 146 of them were motivated by the job market, which shows a wide range of options for graduates in the area, followed by 133 students who consider the course as a preparation for public exams (expectation to take part in public contests). In addition, they also argued that the careers of the accounting profession have good salary expectations and that it is a course in which passing the entrance exam is relatively easy (little competition). In this respect, it should be noted that, at this institution, the candidate/place ratio for the general total of candidates enrolled for the 2015/2016 college entrance examination was 8 competitors per place.

For the 302 respondents, questions were also raised about their satisfaction with the Accounting course, observing that 59% argued they were satisfied; 28% neither dissatisfied nor satisfied. Six and two percent of the responses were totally satisfied and dissatisfied, respectively. Finally, 5% of the respondents said they were totally dissatisfied.

As a complement, we inquired about the interest of these 302 students to pursue postgraduate education in Accounting or not. Of the total sample, 25% of them are not interested; 33% want to study a *lato sensu* postgraduate course in Accounting and 13% in another area; 23% think about taking a *stricto sensu* course in Accounting and 5% in another area. On the basis of these results, the students' considerable interest in attending a master's and doctoral degree in accounting area or not stands out, possibly justified by the institution offering several *stricto sensu* postgraduate courses, including in Accounting.

4.2 Preparation of the data

For the treatment of the data, we verified the multivariate outliers, the normality and variance of the data for further application of factorial analysis and structural equations.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test is used to indicate whether the distribution of the study variable derives from a population with normal distribution. Considering a significance level of 5%, it can be inferred that the results do not present a normal distribution. Next, the presence of outliers was verified using the Mahalanolis distance criterion (D^2), which presents a chi-square distribution with k degrees of freedom (number of variables analyzed). By means of this criterion, we observed the presence of 6 outliers that were kept in the sample, as statistical procedures were performed both with and without and no significant differences were evidenced.

Then, we performed Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) at two moments: (i) first, it was elaborated without fixing a number of factors, identifying up to three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (Kaiser's criterion); (ii) then, another procedure was performed, setting the number of 1, in which the indicators with low commonalities were verified, which were individually removed. At the end of the factorial analysis, the following indicators were obtained:

Table 3

Factorial Analysis

Dimensions	KMO	Explained Variance	Scale Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Attitude	0.778	64.65%	4	0.816
Subjective Norm	0.648	60.67%	3	0.675
Perc. Behav. Control	0.741	61.61%	4	0.79
Intention	0.837	79.99%	4	0.916

Source: research data

In line with the data in Table 3, it was verified that, for all the constructs, the EFA presented total explained variance superior to 50% and with KMO superior to 0.5, validating the application of the Structural Equation Modelling technique. In addition, some indicators had to be excluded, so that the Attitude construct finished with four indicators; the Subjective Norm (SN) with three questions; and Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) and Intention with four each.

Regarding the indicators that were excluded in the factorial procedure for the “attitude” construct, three dealt with factors extrinsic to the students, such as perceived status-prestige; significant results (remuneration, benefits); and career opportunities; and one intrinsic factor related to the perception that the work of Accounting careers requires aptitude (vocation). For the SN construct, it was observed that parents, teachers, relatives (siblings, uncles, cousins) are not significant referents that influence students to pursue a career in Accounting because they refer to the excluded indicators. In relation to the PBC, the indicators related to the ability to perform the work in a career in Accounting have not been validated, in the belief that the knowledge obtained in Accounting is insufficient to pursue one of the careers. These two indicators were possibly compromised though because they were formulated in reverse form to the respondents in order to test their attention.

4.3 Evaluation of the measurement model and the structural model

In order to evaluate the internal consistency of the model, the Composite Reliability and Cronbach’s Alpha were used according to the results presented in Table 5. Together with these results, the quality assumptions highlighted by the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are evidenced, which represents the model’s intensity of determination. This index (VME) also represents convergent validity and refers to the “extent to which a measure correlates positively with alternative measures for the same construct” (Hair Jr. Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2013, p. 102). In this understanding, when this coefficient is greater than 0.5, it means that, on average, the latent variable explains more than half of the variance of its indicators (Hair Jr. *et al.*, 2013).

Table 4

Construct validity and consistency

Dimensions	KMO	Explained Variance	Scale Items	
Attitude	0.778	64.65%	4	0.816
Subjective Norm	0.648	60.67%	3	0.675
Perc. Behav. Control	0.741	61.61%	4	0.79
Intention	0.837	79.99%	4	0.916

Source: research data

According to Table 4, the values recommended by the literature for AVE (AVE > 0.5) and for Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7) were complied with. For Cronbach’s alpha, according to Nunnally (1978) and Hair Jr., Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt (2014), the values must be equal to or greater than 0.70, except in exploratory research, when lower coefficients are admitted. Only one result below the suggested value of 0.6747 was found for the Subjective Norm construct. Nevertheless, the coefficient is very close to the acceptable value.

To proceed with the analysis of the measurement model, the discriminant validity is highlighted, which refers to the “extent to which a construct is distinct from other constructs by empirical standards” (Hair Jr. *et al.*, 2013, p.104). For this validity, two forms of observation are found in the literature: (i) cross loadings, and (ii) Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981). In the first, it is evident that the weights of the indicators associated with the construct should be greater than the cross loadings and, when there are loadings that exceed the external loadings of the indicators, discriminant validity problems emerge. In turn, the Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981) is applied by comparing the square root of the AVE coefficients with the correlations of the latent variables. The square root of the AVE (each construct) should be larger than its highest correlation with another construct. If the criterion is not met, the indicator of a specific construct can be extracted in an attempt to meet the suggested criteria, but with caution, because, while it can improve the reliability or discriminant validity, on the other hand, it can decrease the content validity.

In this study, both ways of measuring discriminant validity were met but, in Table 5, the results are reported according to Fornell and Larcker’s criterion (1981).

Table 5
Discriminant validity - Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981).

Construct	Attitude	PBC	Intention	Subjective Norm
Attitude	0.8023	-	-	-
PBC	0.4573	0.9276	-	-
Intention	0.6320	0.5480	0.8940	-
Subjective Norm	0.3616	0.3347	0.4179	0.7701

Source: research data

Table 5 shows that the latent variables satisfy the conditions recommended in the literature for the Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981), that is, there is discriminant validity in the data analyzed. Next, according to Hair Jr. *et al.* (2009), the R2 coefficients were also verified, which demonstrates the percentage of variance of a latent variable that is explained by other latent variables. The R2 values provide a relative adjustment measure for each structural equation, and are also provided for endogenous latent variables only. Table 4 indicates that the R2 between the constructs was 0.5058, which suggests a strong explanatory power for the construct intention through the constructs attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. Thus, in Figure 2, in addition to the structural relationships of the variables, the obtained R² is shown.

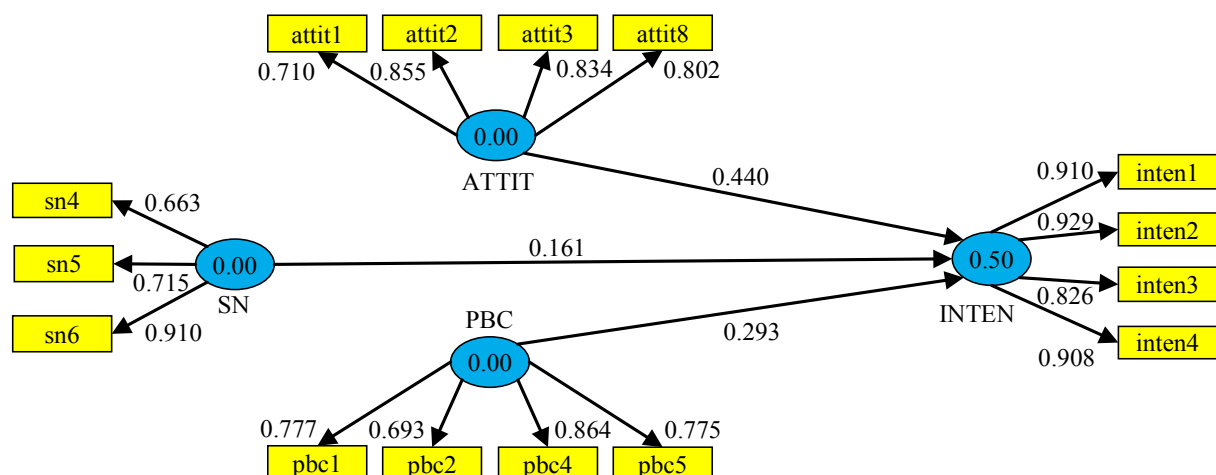


Figure 2. Adjusted Final Model

Source: research data.

Figure 2 shows that the influences of the predictive variables of intention are positive, indicating that the three variables of the model, together, explain the students' intention to pursue a career in approximately 51%. The next step was to estimate the model using the bootstrap function. With this function, the final parameter estimates are calculated for all generated samples and the confidence interval is not estimated by sampling error, but directly observed. Thus, the bootstrapping procedure was used to obtain the t-statistic in order to assess the significance of the parameters (Hair Jr. *et al.*, 2014). This procedure combines the estimates with the original sample and is appropriate to evaluate the significance of the proposed model estimators. Their results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Path Coefficient Result

Structural Relation	Original coefficient	t-value	Hypothesis	p-value
Attitude → Intention	0.4398	22.787	H1	0.0000
Subjective Norm → Intention	0.1608	9.0468	H2	0.0000
PBC → Intention	0.4398	12.763	H3	0.0000

Source: research data

Table 6 shows the t-test for the path used in the model, coefficients superior to 1.96 being considered acceptable according to Hair Jr. *et al.* (2009), obtained by bootstrapping analysis.

Based on Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), the first hypothesis (H1) sought to verify if attitude positively influences the behavioral intention of the students to pursue a career in Accounting. The results were significant ($\beta = 0.4398$, $t = 22.787$, $p < 0.01$), that is, the students' intrinsic factors significantly influence their intention to pursue one of the Accounting careers, thus supporting the first hypothesis. It is curious concerning the findings of H1 that the respondents do not perceive extrinsic factors, such as perceived status-prestige; significant results (remuneration, benefits); and career opportunities as significant influencers of the attitude of pursuing an accountant career. This is so because these indicators were not valid in the factor analysis process and, therefore, are not validated in the structural equations procedure.

The second hypothesis sought to investigate whether the subjective norm positively influences the intention of the graduating students to pursue a career in Accounting (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Solikhah, 2014). The findings ($\beta = 0.1608$, $t = 9.0468$, $p < 0.01$) support this statement, that is, the evaluation of the referents' perceptions, who are influential individuals, affect their intentions. It is worth pointing out, however, that the most influential referents are friends, partners and professionals in the area of Accounting.

Supported by Ajzen (1991), H3 was intended to show if the perceived behavioral control positively influences the graduating students' intention to pursue a career in Accounting, which was supported by the results ($\beta = 0.4398$, $t = 12.763$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, it is inferred that students believe in their ability to practice an accounting career after graduating. This finding is in line with the study by Santos and Almeida (2018), which investigated the intention of graduating students from all over the State of Paraná, who believed in their competencies to pursue their careers and, consequently, the accounting profession.

Finally, based on the results evidenced, it is worth noting that, although the graduates evaluate the opportunities of insertion and career progression in a more realistic and objective manner in comparison with the new, second or third-year students (Bardagi & Boff, 2010; Santos & Almeida, 2018); these are also aware in view of their intended professional activities. Nevertheless, as they are still in training, their intentions can change by the time they complete their undergraduate course.

5. Conclusions

The focus of this study was to investigate the behavioral intention of all students enrolled in the Accounting course of a federal university in the South of Brazil to pursue a career in accounting, in the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

One of the justifications for investigating the intention of accounting students to pursue a career in the field or not is due to the considerable growth in the enrollment of young people in Accounting courses in recent years. This expansion started in the last decade of the twentieth century, with approximately 262 undergraduate Accounting courses offering 97,223 places, data that showed significant growth in subsequent years, according to data from 2013, when 1,168 in-class courses were offered with 328,031 places (INEP, 2013). Despite the great demand for the course and although professional practice in Accounting is a market protected by corporate laws and regulations, it is illusory to think that all entrants and/or graduates want to build a professional career in this area. Therefore, the findings of this study can support discussions about the desired profile of the students and/or changes in the curriculum, so that graduates compete with trainees from other areas in professional activities that require knowledge of Accounting, instead of focusing only on the accountant career.

Regarding the research results, the data revealed that, regarding the attitude, the students do not see the careers of the accounting profession with recognition of status and prestige; without good remuneration; and no good opportunities available in the market. Thus, the results lead to what Byrne, Willis and Burke (2012), Demagalhães, Wilde and Fitzgerald (2011), Mbawuni and Nimako (2015) argued, as the students' perceived benefits of the accounting career can lead them to pursue a career in this area or not, as the intrinsic factors are related to satisfaction due to the opportunity to work in a dynamic and challenging environment that stimulates the creativity of the accounting professional, which the students under analysis did not perceive.

Regarding perceived behavioral control, respondents perceive themselves capable of practicing an accounting career, thus having strong beliefs in their abilities and also in the conditions to pursue an accounting career or not. The results confirm Bardagi and Paradiso (2003) and Safta's (2015) observations on the individuals' reflections on their interests and aspirations, which can make their management effective, as the choice is also influenced by the cognitive and affective consequences it produces.

As to the subjective norm, it has little influence on the students' intention to pursue a career in the accounting area. These results are in line with Santos and Almeida (2018) in a study carried out at the state level, investigating the intention of the graduating students at public HEIs throughout the state of Paraná to pursue a career in Accounting. Among the findings, the relevance of the opinions of professionals in the area (peers), friends and partners in this decision was verified. Thus, they concluded that individuals who are already included in the profession/career exert great influence on the decision of future professionals.

Thus, the research results contribute to clarify factors that can significantly influence the students' intention to pursue a career in the accounting area, and may also provide subsidies for aspects that need to be improved to stimulate interest. The findings of this study also contribute to the understanding of Accounting students' profiles at a federal public HEI in Paraná and how the competent entities can use and deepen research on the variables that influence the intention to more consistently develop courses that are more appropriate to the market. For the HEI, another possible approach would be to develop actions aimed at supporting professional practice, in order to enhance students' interest and knowledge.

This study contributes to the advancement of the theme career choice of higher education students in Brazil, mainly to evaluate the most significant aspects of this process; to the use of social psychology theories in accounting and to increase the use of structural equation modeling using Partial Least Square (PLS) with SmartPLS software. As a limitation, it can be mentioned that this research has investigated only students from a single institution, which can be expanded in other studies. Moreover, one can extend the study by seeking to understand which variables can affect the attitudes and perceived behavioral control in the Brazilian context, as well as the intention of individuals in the area to recommend the profession.

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