HOW DOES SELF-ESTEEM IMPACT GENERATION Z'S BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS?

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Abstract
In a society that emphasizes an individual's strengths and his tendency to cope with any circumstances, a person's self-esteem becomes much more important, consciously or unconsciously governing his entire life. Self-esteem is not only an important factor in terms of how it affects relationships between individuals and the socialization process but also plays a decisive role from the perspective of consumer behavior. Self-esteem can affect the process of buying products and implicitly the behavioral intentions that individuals form, intentions that precede the decision-making process. In this paper, we define the self-esteem of members of Generation Z through the prism of three components: the relational self, the social self, and the real self, following the influence they exert on behavioral intentions.

Key words: *self-esteem, behavioral intention, Generation Z, buying process, behavioral attitudes*

JEL Classification: *M30, M31*

I. INTRODUCTION

Each individual is different. This is the assertion that justifies the behavior of individuals, and the way they act or make decisions. The family, the education received, the close people around, the political environment, cultural factors, and society as a whole leave their mark on the development of each person, shaping their behavior. Whether they have a common interest or share the same passions, individuals have a well-defined role in society, which is distinct about each person's personality. However, regardless of the previously mentioned factors, of the aspects that characterize us, there is a common element, which we often leave out – each of us is a consumer.

Consumption is part of people's lives. Most of the time, this is a factor that organizes our existence. Regardless of the financial situation or the pleasure of going shopping, every person is subject to this routine.

Of course, consumer behavior is not only influenced by cultural factors or other elements that belong to the environment in which they live. Most of the time, the first aspect with a noticeable influence on behavior is represented by self-esteem. Broadly defined as an individual's opinion of itself, self-esteem is reinforced from an early age, continuing to govern an individual's behavior well into adulthood.

Nowadays, the effects of self-esteem reflect not only on an individual's personality but also on the actions he implements in his daily life. Starting from the behavior we have in professional activity, as well as consumer behavior, self-esteem is a primary factor that governs our existence.

In recent years, with the definition of Generation Z, self-esteem and aspects related to personal development have become more and more often mentioned in the public space. As one of the most numerous cohorts (Kardes et al., 2015), members of Generation Z have the power to change certain existing perceptions at the level of society. Familiar with and contemporary with technology, Baby Bloomers do not ignore aspects such as protecting the environment, being followers of a healthy lifestyle, and preferring to adopt sustainable behavior. They are also concerned with their education, being followers of personal development courses (Khairi, 2022), an aspect that contributes to improving self-esteem.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of "self-esteem" appeared for the first time from the desire of specialists to explain the factors that contribute to its achievement, respectively its contribution to the evolution of individuals. According to the literature, it is considered that the first attempt to define this concept dates back to 1893 when psychologist William James defined self-esteem starting from the following syntax "Self-esteem = Success/Aspirations (Aspirations)". James (1893, p. 311) argued that "such a fraction may be increased by reducing the denominator or by increasing the numerator".

Subsequently, "self-esteem" was analyzed by specialists to explain the differences that exist between individuals, still representing an important subject of study in psychology. Rogers uses the term self, which is

considered a synonym for self-esteem, and in the author's opinion, a new definition of the concept is necessary. Ignoring previous information, it takes into account three dimensions of self-esteem or self, such: self-image ("current self"), the ideal way of perceiving one's image ("ideal self"), social projection of the self or how the individual is perceived by those around him ("the social self") (Rogers, 1951).

In terms of establishing the meaning of self-esteem in the context of marketing, an important contribution is attributed to Joseph Sirgy. He, through the numerous articles directed on this subject, believes that self-esteem is optimally correlated with consumer behavior. In this context, the author introduces new concepts, such as "self-image meaning", defined as the power attached to a current and specific self-image (which corresponds to the ideal self-image), respectively "self-image perception" (the current self-image) (Sirgy, 1982, p. 288). Sirgy refers only to the actual self and its ideal projection, ignoring the persuasive power of the members of the reference groups, which can influence the values with whom the individual relates, as well as the norms to that he adheres.

Self-esteem influences the behavior an individual has in everyday life. The decisions he makes, the risks he is willing to take, and his attitude toward the challenges he faces are aspects that are based on his level of self-esteem. A minimum threshold or, on the contrary, a high level of self-esteem determines how the consumer will act.

Specialists in the field of marketing believe that self-esteem is a materialization of an individual's attitudes (Solomon, 2017). Attitudes show us whether "a person is favorably or unfavorably predisposed to some objects, such as brands of products, services or stores" (Plăiaș, 2011, p. 40) and can be deduced from what consumers say or from the behavior shown, these not being always observable. Attitudes guide the decision-making process, contributing to its materialization. The actual purchase, followed by consumption, is determined by the attitude of an individual and how he finds himself in the attributes of the product. Frequent purchases of an item, along with its recommendation and others within the reference group can help a marketer by informing him that the individual in question has a favorable attitude towards the product under review. In this situation, the use of the article by the customer reassures the rightness of the decision made. Thus, the consumption of a product and the testing of its functions contribute to the generation of a feeling of satisfaction or, conversely, of dissatisfaction, in which the use of the product does not provide a satisfactory result (Kotler and Keller, 2012). The expectations of a customer from an article, these being formulated about the attitudinal characteristics of the individual, cause a feeling of frustration or satisfaction, both of which lead to the level of self-esteem and implicitly, to the fluctuations recorded by it.

Making a synthesis of the opinions presented, we notice that self-esteem is in continuous development, evolving along with the needs, desires, attitudes, or personality of the consumer. Similarly, we observe that the basis of the development of purchase intention is precisely the determination of the individual to satisfy these needs and desires. Thus, consumer behavior also represents a dynamic process, following the trend established by the personal and social development of the individual, his needs and desires being fully consistent with the new hierarchical position acquired by the consumer in professional life and within society.

Early research on the influence of self-esteem on consumer behavior highlighted aspects related to customers' preferences to purchase items that have an image congruent to the person's self-image (Gardner and Levy, 1955). For the individual, the purchased item represents a "symbol" (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967).

According to the previously analyzed aspects, we note that numerous factors can influence self-esteem. Starting from the idea that there are different methods of measuring self-esteem, we also take into account the differences between individuals. In many cases, the discrepancies between the level of self-esteem are not only due to the education or the geographical region where the individuals included in the analyses come from. Most of the time, the main factor behind the differences in age. Depending on the period in which they were born, the experiences they had, or, the social events they took part in, their level of self-esteem changes. Over time, age was the main criterion taken into account by specialists when they sought to achieve population segmentation. The division of individuals into cohorts in this variable facilitated the characterization of groups, as well as the identification of their desires. Thus, generational cohorts have facilitated the knowledge, by specialists, of consumption behaviors and the traits of individuals.

According to the generational theory developed in 1992 by Strauss and Howe, individuals are divided into generations or cohorts according to significant historical events or social changes they have experienced. According to them, the life experiences felt by people in the same time interval are similar, while being different from the experiences of individuals who did not take part in that event (Howe and Strauss, 1992). Therefore, each cohort has a homogeneous behavior (Noble and Schewe, 2003), sharing cultural norms and common perspectives, which are different from other generations, a fact that gives uniqueness to each group.

As the latest generation analyzed by specialists to define behavior and preferences, there are different opinions regarding Generation Z. The first aspect on which no unanimous opinion can be identified is related to the years that define this cohort. If Williams and Page (2011) as well as Lan (2014) argued that it includes people born after 1994, with the upper limit being 2010, Williams (2015) suggested the range 1990 – 2000, and Last (2014), Jacobsen (2017) and Lanier (2017) mentions the period 1996 – 2011. So, with all the mentioned

differences, the most frequent interval mentioned in the literature is 1996 – 2000 (Dabija et al., 2019). In this paper, we will share the opinion formulated by Williams and Page (2011) and by Lan (2014) and consider the period 1994 – 2010 as defining years of Generation Z.

Considered to be the cohort that includes the largest number of people (Kardes et al., 2015), Generation Z is characterized by familiarity with the online environment. The period in which they were born coincides with the expansion of technology and the Internet, so these elements were present in the lives of young people from their early years, contributing to the education they received and shaping their personality and behavior. Based on these considerations, we can say that Generation Z is more familiar with technology and smartphones, which are indispensable in everyday life.

Although some traits they exhibit are similar to those of Generation Y, Baby Bloomers are more concerned with social life. They get more involved in social responsibility campaigns, carefully follow actions that reflect sustainable development that companies implement, and are interested in protecting the environment (Dabija et al., 2019). These aspects are also correlated with the self-esteem of individuals, especially with the social self. Involvement in social responsibility campaigns also influences the way individuals are perceived in everyday life.

The proposed conceptual model is based on the theory of planned behavior.

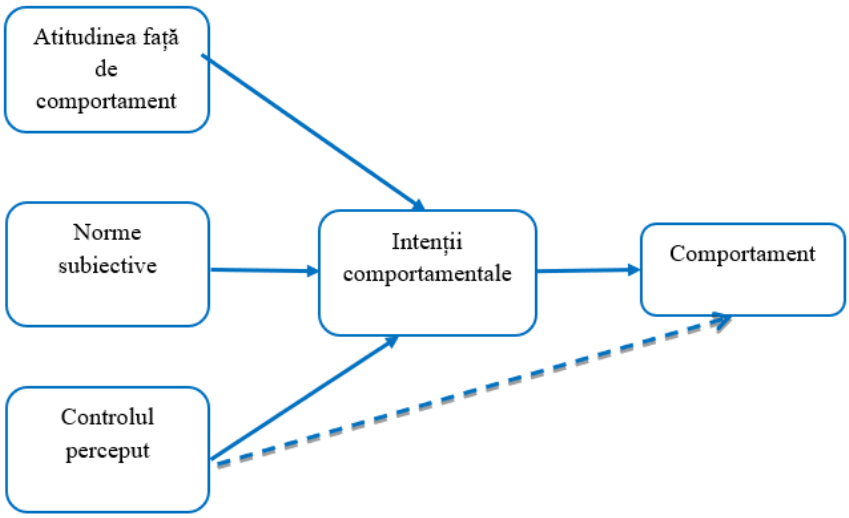

Figure no. 1 – Planned Behavior Theory
Source: (Ajzen, 1991, p. 182)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Figure no. 1) is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) developed by Ajzen and Fishbein in 1975 and revised in 1980 (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Similar to the three-component model of attitudes, TRA takes into account cognitive, affective, and conative components (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2015), suggesting that attitudes explain the actions of individuals, being an indicator of their behavior (Balog and Cristescu, 2009). The theory starts from the premise that researchers need to measure the subjective norms that influence a person's intentions to engage in a certain behavior (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2015).

The studies carried out over time identified some shortcomings of this theory and led the two researchers (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) to take into account the perceived control by individuals, which represents an element missing in the theory of rational action. Thus, in 1991 researchers developed the theory of planned behavior, which, similar to TRA, has as its central element the intention of an individual to manifest a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The theory of planned behavior constitutes a theoretical basis that facilitates the understanding of the decision-making process undertaken by consumers. Starting from the theory of rational action, TPB is considered by researchers as a behavioral theory that explains the conduct of individuals based on their attitudes, being a point of reference in the study of the actions undertaken by individuals (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen, 2005; Buaphiban and Truong, 2017). The assumption underlying this theory starts from the idea that consumers typically have a behavior characterized by a high level of sensitivity.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This scientific approach aims to identify how the three components of self-esteem – the real self, the relational self, and the social self influence behavioral attitudes and, implicitly, behavioral intentions. Thus, we propose a conceptual model (figure no. 3) that reflects the relationships between the three components of self-esteem and attitudes, respectively behavioral intentions.

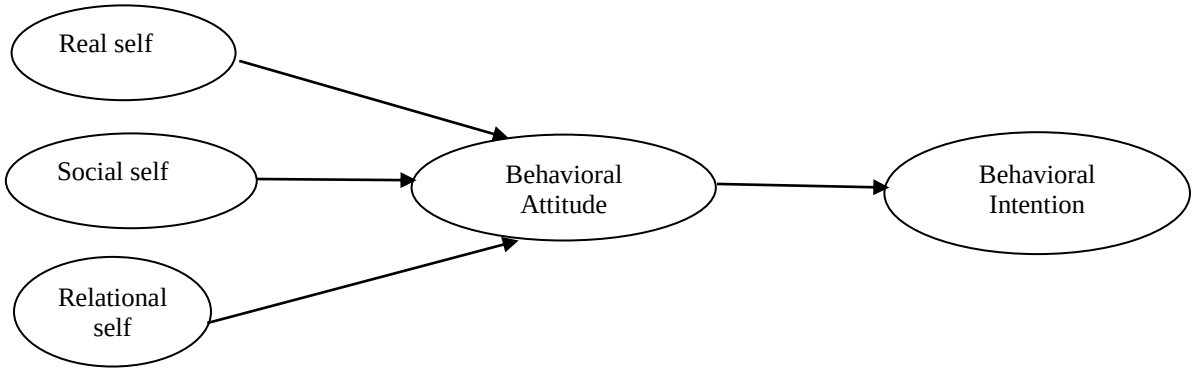

Figure no. 3: ***The proposed conceptual model***
Source: made by the author

For this model we formulate the following secondary objectives:
O1b: Identifying the influence of the real self on behavioral attitudes.
O2b: Identifying the influence of the relational self on behavioral attitudes.
O3b: Identifying the influence of the social self on behavioral attitudes.
O4b: Identifying the influence of behavioral attitudes on behavioral intentions.
To achieve the secondary objectives, the following hypotheses are formulated:
H1: The real self has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes.
H2: The relational self has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes.
H3: The social self has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes.
H3: The real self has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes.
H4: Behavioral attitudes have a direct and positive influence on behavioral intentions.

To verify the working hypotheses, we carried out a quantitative research. The questionnaire was roughly comprised of 70 questions and it was applied directly by the author one to one, the sample is made up of the students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Management at UBB, who are people from Generation Z.

Although the number of statements included in the questionnaire was quite high, due to the subject under analysis, a large number of valid questionnaires were obtained. Thus, it was decided to apply several 1,400 questionnaires among students. Following the establishment of the database and the processing of the questionnaires, a total of 1,233 valid responses were obtained. The remaining 167 questionnaires were eliminated on the basis of being incomplete, with answers not marked for all questions considered.

IV. RESULTS

A total of 1,233 valid questionnaires were obtained from the research. From the perspective of demographic data, 71% of the people were female, thus preserving the existing gender structure at the faculty level as well. At the same time, 61.20% of them came from the urban environment, most of them having an income between 501 - 1000 lei (40.1%).

For the structural model resulting from statistical processing (figure no. 3), it is necessary to test the fit of the model. Thus, the recommendation from the specialized literature (Gaskin, 2016d) will be taken into account, thus every time the model changes, it is necessary to check if it meets the conditions related to its suitability, or in other words, if the creditworthiness index values reach the threshold minimum recommended by specialists.

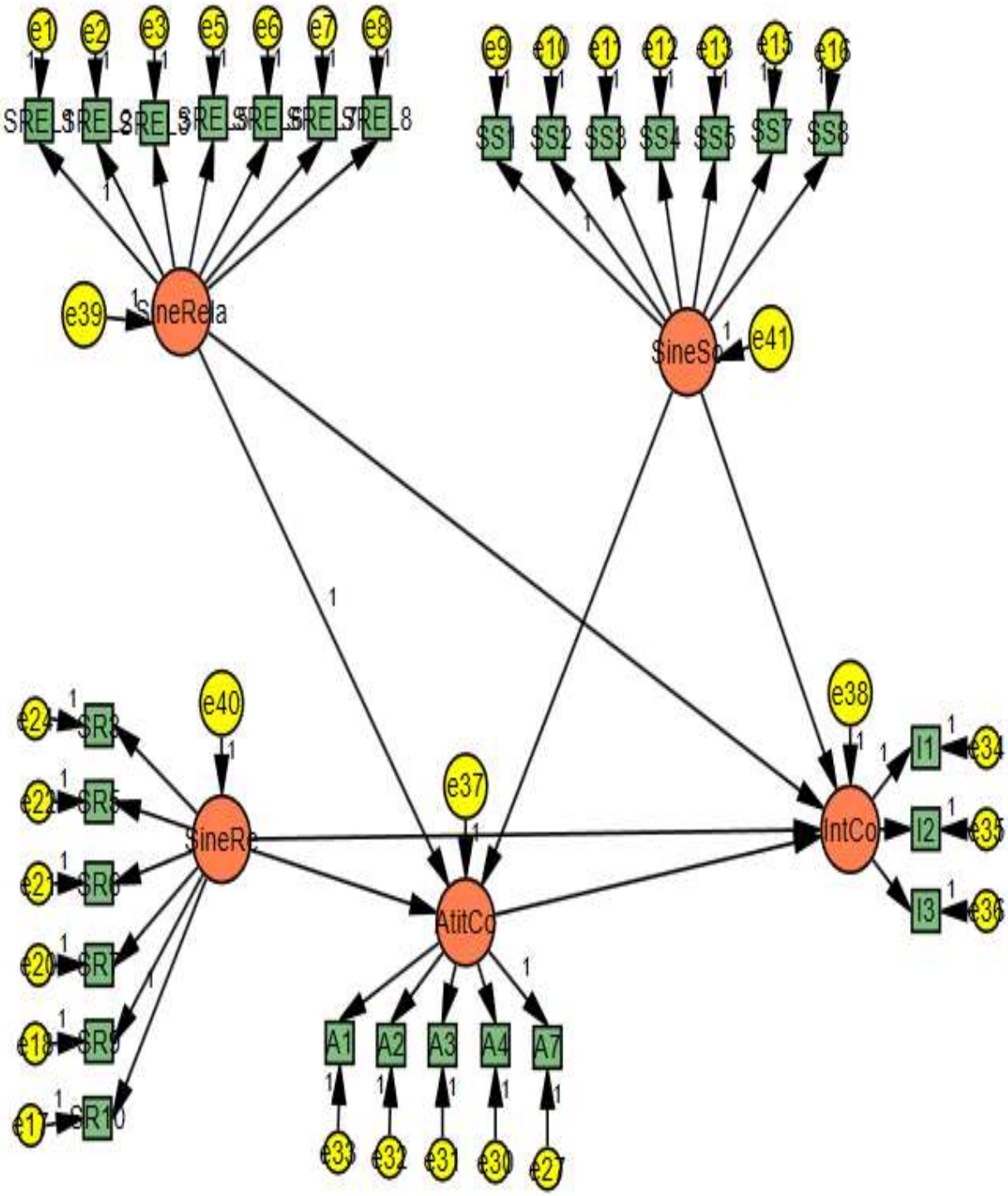

Figure no. 3 – The structural model
Source: made by the author

For the structural model in figure no. 3, the results obtained from statistical processing are presented in table no. 1.

Table no. 1: Fit indices for the measurement model

Index	Obtained values for the measurement model	Minimum acceptable threshold levels (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2010)
GFI	0,905	≥ 0,9
RMSEA	0,056	≤ 0,08
χ2 df (CMIN)	4,925	≤ 2,5 or ≤ 5
AGFI	0,896	≥ 0,8
IFI	0,921	≥ 0,9
TLI	0,914	≥ 0,9
CFI	0,921	≥ 0,9
PCLOSE	0,001	≤ 0,05

Source: made by the author

Starting from the fit indices values and taking into account the formulated hypotheses we can establish the status of these assertions. Thus, hypothesis *H1: The social self has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes* is fully validated.

In contrast, the influence of the relational self on behavioral attitudes is insignificant, in this case, the corresponding regression coefficient is statistically equal to zero. Thus, hypothesis *H2: The relational self has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes*, is not being confirmed.

The study conducted by Du and his partners in 2013 stated that the relational self does not exert an influence on an individual's attitude toward the phenomenon of anxiety. Their research compared two samples, one consisting of people from China and the other including individuals from Australia. The results obtained as a result of the data collection disproved the hypothesis originally stated by the specialists which states that the relational self influences behavioral attitudes. Thus, the results obtained for the present study are in agreement with the study conducted by Du and his collaborators in 2013.

Equally, the statistical processing demonstrated that there is no influence of the real self on behavioral attitudes, the impact of this component on attitudes being insignificant from a statistical perspective. In conclusion, hypothesis *H3: The real self has a direct and positive influence on behavioral attitudes* is disproved.

In contrast, the research carried out by Abamara and his collaborators (2016) shows us that the real self influences an individual's attitude toward the phenomena that affect personal integrity. The study carried out in 2016 among students analyzed the attitude of young people towards the phenomenon of obesity, and following the processing of the collected data it was demonstrated that both among men and women, the real self directly influences the behavioral attitude. The difference between the research carried out by Abamara et al. (2016) and the present study can also be explained by how the real self concept was operationalized in the two types of research. Thus, for this scientific approach, the scale for measuring the real self proposed by Rosenberg was used, while the study undertaken by Abamara (2016) was based on the scale designed by Hudson (1982), containing several questions (26), some among them including aspects that also refer to the relationship with the individuals in the immediate environment, an aspect that, in this paper, the author evaluated through the relational component of the self.

Considering the statistical data obtained, we can affirm that behavioral attitudes have a direct, positive influence on intentions. Thus, the value of the regression coefficient allows the full validation of hypothesis *H4: Behavioral attitudes have a direct and positive influence on behavioral intentions*. The confirmation of this hypothesis is on the same line as the results obtained by Ajzen, Timko, and White (1982), the relationship between attitude and behavioral intention being validated also in the case of the study carried out by specialists.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Four hypotheses were formulated for the proposed conceptual model, some of them being validated by the results generated by the statistical processing.

The verification of the correlations between the real self, the relational self, and the social self on attitudes, respectively behavioral intentions, led to new statistical results, an aspect that contributed to the invalidation of two of the formulated hypotheses. While other specialists also identified the lack of influence of the relational self on behavioral attitudes (Du et al., 2013), the results obtained in the analysis of the influence exerted by the real self on behavioral attitudes are in contrast to other studies in the literature (Abamara et al. al., 2016).

The first relationship tested in the second model was between the actual self and behavioral attitude. The results obtained regarding this hypothesis disproved the existence of an influence between the two constructs.

The relationship between the social self and the behavioral attitude is confirmed by statistical processing, the influence exerted by this component of self-esteem being a direct and positive one. Starting from the premise that the social self is defined through the image that an individual has of himself, the greater influence exerted by this component on attitudes is justified.

The influence exerted by the relational self on behavioral attitudes was also tested in the present study, this hypothesis being invalidated.

In conclusion, based on the results obtained from the statistical processing, we can say that behavioral attitude is influenced differently by the three components of self-esteem. Thus, on attitudes, the social self has a much higher impact compared to the real self and the relational self.

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