CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND MARKETING

The Gap Between What Consumers Say They Want and What They Actually Buy

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Published November 2026

Abstract

Businesses spend a lot of time asking customers what they want. Surveys, feedback forms and sales conversations all try to answer that one question. Yet what people say they want and what they finally buy are often not the same thing. This paper looks at why that gap exists and what it means for marketers and salespeople. It focuses on high-involvement purchases such as homes and eyewear, where the decision is costly, personal, or both.

The study follows a secondary research approach and draws on published work in consumer psychology, marketing and retail. The author's internship experience at a real estate consultancy, BlisssRed Pvt. Ltd., and a case study of Lenskart are used as practical illustrations, not as proof. The paper looks at intention–behaviour research, the way preferences are formed at the moment of choice, and the effect of price, choice overload, trust, channels and follow-up.

The paper finds that the gap does not mean customers are dishonest. Most people are sincere when they state a preference. But needs are often unclear at the start, preferences shift as options appear, and practical limits such as budget, timing and risk take over at the point of purchase. Businesses that keep asking, watch what customers actually do, and give honest guidance are better placed to close the gap than those that rely on one survey or one conversation.

Keywords: consumer behaviour; intention-behaviour gap; stated preferences; purchase decisions; consultative selling; customer journey

1 Introduction

Ask a customer what they are looking for and they will usually give a clear answer. A buyer wants a two-bedroom flat close to work. Someone buying glasses wants a light, simple frame. The answer sounds reliable, and businesses build products, advertisements and sales scripts around answers like these. The trouble is that the final purchase does not always match the answer. The flat that gets booked may be in a different area. The frame that goes home may be the one the customer had not even mentioned.

This difference between stated preference and actual purchase is often called the intention–behaviour gap. It has been studied in many fields, from healthy eating to ethical shopping to technology adoption. It matters a great deal in marketing, because companies plan production, pricing and promotion on the assumption that what customers say is a fair guide to what they will do.

The gap is especially important in high-involvement purchases. These are decisions where the customer takes on a large cost, or where the product affects daily life in a real way. A house is the clearest example. Spectacles are another, because the wrong pair affects comfort and vision. In both

cases customers research, compare, hesitate and change their minds. A single answer at the start of the process says very little about where they will end up.

The author saw this directly during a summer internship at BlisssRed Pvt. Ltd., a real estate consultancy in Pune. Customers rarely shared their full requirements in the first call. Budget, location and layout became clearer only after several conversations, and in one case a couple's needs became clear enough to book a 2 BHK flat only after repeated discussions and a site visit. A related case study of Lenskart showed the same thing from the retail side, where customers move between the website, the app, home try-on and the store before they buy.

This paper asks why the gap appears and how businesses can deal with it. It does not treat the gap as a flaw in customers. Instead it asks what is happening in the mind of the buyer, and in the sales process, between the moment someone says "this is what I want" and the moment they pay.

2 Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine why consumers' stated preferences and intentions often differ from their actual purchases, with a focus on high-involvement products and services.

The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To understand the meaning of stated preference and the intention–behaviour gap in consumer behaviour.
2. To review the psychological and behavioural reasons why consumers do not always buy what they say they want.
3. To examine how price, choice overload, trust and perceived risk affect the final purchase decision.
4. To study how shopping channels and the customer journey shape the gap in modern retail.
5. To use examples from real estate sales and eyewear retail to show how the gap appears in practice.
6. To suggest practical ways in which businesses and salespeople can understand customers better and reduce the gap.

3 Literature review

Research on this subject comes from several areas, including psychology, marketing and retail studies. This section reviews the main ideas that help explain why people do not always act on what they say.

3.1 Stated preferences and intentions

Marketers collect stated preferences through surveys, interviews and sales conversations. These tell a business what customers believe they want. A purchase intention is a step further, because it is a person's statement about what they plan to do. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) explains that intentions are shaped by a person's attitude, the opinions of people around them, and how much control they feel they have over the action. The theory treats intention as the closest predictor of behaviour. It also admits that intention only turns into action when the person actually has the means and the opportunity.

3.2 The intention-behaviour gap

Evidence shows that intentions predict behaviour only partly. In a review of earlier studies, Sheeran (2002) reported that intentions explain only around 28 per cent of the variation in behaviour. A later meta-analysis by Webb and Sheeran (2006) found that a medium-to-large change in intention led to only a small-to-medium change in behaviour. Sheeran and Webb (2016) describe a group of people who intend to act but never do, and they point to forgetting, competing priorities and a lack of planning as common causes.

In marketing, Morwitz et al. (2007) studied when purchase intentions predict real sales. They found that the link depends on the type of product and the situation, and that stated intentions are an imperfect guide. Carrington et al. (2010) studied ethical consumers who say they care about fair and sustainable products but often buy something else. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) reached a similar view on environmentally friendly behaviour, noting that cost, habit and convenience often get in the way of good intentions.

3.3 How preferences are actually formed

Part of the gap exists because preferences are not always fixed. Simon (1955) argued that people have limited time and information, so they settle for a good enough choice and do not search for the perfect one. Bettman et al. (1998) go further and suggest that consumers often build their preferences at the moment they choose, using the options in front of them. Under this view, a customer does not walk into a shop with a complete list of wants. The list takes shape as they see what is available.

Nisbett and Wilson (1977) raise another point. They found that people often cannot report accurately why they behaved as they did. A customer who says "I only care about price" may in fact be influenced by appearance, a friendly salesperson or a feeling of comfort. The answer is honest, but it is not a full account.

3.4 Price, risk and choice overload

Kahneman and Tversky (1979) showed that people feel losses more strongly than equal gains. In a purchase, this can make a buyer pull back at the last moment when the cost starts to feel real, even though they were keen earlier. Price and perceived risk are therefore more powerful at the point of payment than at the point of discussion.

Too many options can also get in the way. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) ran a well-known study in which shoppers were offered either a small or a large display of jams. More people stopped at the large display, but far more bought from the small one, around 30 per cent against 3 per cent. The result suggests that having more choice can make buyers less likely to choose at all. For products like property or eyewear, where the range is wide, this is a real concern.

3.5 Plans, habits and follow-through

Gollwitzer (1999) studied how people turn goals into action and found that specific "if–then" plans make follow-through more likely. A vague wish to buy something "soon" is easy to postpone. A plan that says when and where the purchase will happen is much more likely to be carried out. This idea matters in sales, because a good salesperson helps the customer take a clear next step, such as a site visit or an eye test, rather than leaving the decision open.

3.6 Channels and the customer journey

Modern shoppers rarely use one channel. Verhoef et al. (2007) describe the research-shopper, who gathers information in one channel and buys in another. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe the purchase as a journey with many touchpoints before, during and after the sale. In this kind of journey, stated preferences collected at one touchpoint can be out of date by the time the customer reaches the next. This is relevant to businesses that combine online and offline selling.

4 Research gap

The intention–behaviour gap has been studied widely, but most of the work is about health, the environment and ethical products. Less attention has been given to high-involvement purchases such as property and prescription eyewear, where the buyer needs advice and the cost of a wrong decision is high.

Most studies also treat the gap as a problem inside the consumer. They look at what the customer does wrong. Fewer studies ask how the sales process itself, through questions, follow-up and honest advice, helps to narrow the gap. And while the literature on omnichannel retail is growing, it rarely links the customer journey back to the question of changing preferences.

This paper tries to fill part of that space. It brings together the general research on intentions and behaviour and looks at it through two practical examples, real estate consultancy and eyewear retail. It focuses on what businesses can do, and not only on why consumers behave as they do.

5 Research methodology

The study uses a secondary research approach. It reviews existing published work to understand a pattern and does not collect new data from a fresh group of respondents.

5.1 Research design

The design is descriptive and analytical. The descriptive part explains the idea of the intention–behaviour gap and the factors linked to it. The analytical part compares findings from different studies and tests them against two practical examples. The synthesis is mainly qualitative.

5.2 Sources of data

The main sources are peer-reviewed journal articles and academic papers on consumer behaviour, decision-making and retail. Company information from Lenskart's published shareholder letter for FY2025, as used in the author's earlier case study, gives context for the eyewear example (Lenskart Solutions Limited, 2025). The author's Summer Internship Project report and case study are used for illustration (Tiwari, 2026a; 2026b).

5.3 Use of the internship and case study material

The internship report includes observations from about 100 to 150 calls a day, eight site visits, sixteen virtual connects and a questionnaire with 112 valid responses. These are used only to show how the ideas from the literature look in real situations. They are drawn from one organisation over a short period, and the survey sample was mostly under 24 years of age, so they are not treated as proof of a general rule.

5.4 Method of analysis

The literature was grouped under themes: stated preferences, intention and behaviour, preference formation, price and risk, choice overload, and the customer journey. Findings were compared across themes, and the two examples were matched against them. The analysis does not claim that any single cause explains the gap.

5.5 Scope of the study

The study covers high-involvement purchases, with real estate and eyewear as the two examples. It uses international research for the theory and keeps the Indian setting in view for the examples.

5.6 Limitations of the study

Because the study relies on secondary data, its conclusions depend on the quality of the sources. Many of the key studies come from other countries and other product types, such as groceries, and may not apply fully to property or eyewear. The internship and case study examples are small in scale and cannot be generalised. The study also cannot measure the size of the gap for any particular product. It can only explain how and why it appears.

6 Results and discussion

The review points to several connected reasons for the gap. They are discussed below with the help of the two examples.

6.1 Stated preferences are a starting point, not a final answer

The research suggests that a customer's first answer is a starting point. Bettman et al. (1998) show that preferences are built during the choice process, and the internship supports this. Customers at BlisssRed often did not share their full requirements in the first call. Budget, location, layout and timeline became clear only through later conversations (Tiwari, 2026a). The couple who finally booked a 2 BHK flat is a good illustration. Their needs did not change because they were being dishonest at the start. They simply understood their own needs better once they had discussed them and seen the actual options.

This suggests that need assessment should be treated as an ongoing activity and not a one-time form to be filled at the first meeting.

6.2 What people say about themselves is not always complete

Nisbett and Wilson (1977) found that people have limited insight into their own decision-making. The survey in the internship project offers an interesting example. Only 8 per cent of the 112 respondents said that recommendations from others were a key reason for trusting a salesperson, while 76.8 per cent chose honest advice (Tiwari, 2026a). This may be a true picture of how respondents see themselves. But it is also possible that people underrate the influence of other people on their decisions, because social influence is hard to notice in oneself. The survey measures what people say, which is the very thing this paper questions, so the result needs to be read carefully.

6.3 Price and risk show up at the point of purchase

The literature on loss aversion helps explain why a customer who is keen at the discussion stage may hesitate at the booking or payment stage (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). In real estate this is easy to

see because the amount is large. Customers at BlisssRed raised concerns about price, location, layout, possession timelines and other projects (Tiwari, 2026a). These concerns are not always objections to be overcome. Sometimes they point to a need that was not stated earlier, such as a tighter budget or doubts about value. The better response is to understand the concern first. When a project did not fit, showing another option worked better than pushing the first one.

6.4 Too many options can delay decisions

Iyengar and Lepper (2000) found that large selections can reduce buying. BlisssRed works with several developers and projects, which gives customers wide choice. That is a strength, but it also carries the risk of overload. The internship showed that the team narrowed options by mapping budget, location and layout before presenting anything. Lenskart faces a similar issue, since its range runs from eyeglasses and sunglasses to contact lenses and accessories. Its home try-on service, where a limited set of frames is brought to the customer, can be seen as a practical way of narrowing the field (Tiwari, 2026b).

6.5 The customer journey is not one moment

According to Lenskart's FY2025 disclosures, about 45 per cent of its India revenue came from customers who had interacted digitally in the 90 days before purchase (Lenskart Solutions Limited, 2025). This supports the research-shopper idea (Verhoef et al., 2007), because the customer's information and opinion build up across several touchpoints. A preference stated on the website may change after a store visit. The case study also notes that virtual try-on helps online discovery but cannot fully replace a physical trial (Tiwari, 2026b). Customers may like a frame on screen and still choose differently once they wear it. In real estate, site visits and virtual connects play the same role. They let the customer test an earlier idea against reality.

6.6 Honest guidance and light follow-up help close the gap

Gollwitzer (1999) suggests that clear next steps help people act on intentions. In sales, this means helping the customer move to something specific, such as a visit, a test or a comparison. The survey showed that 74.1 per cent agreed they like salespeople who ask about their needs first. It also showed that 65.2 per cent become less interested when they get repeated "have you decided?" messages (Tiwari, 2026a). Together these suggest that useful guidance helps, while pressure does not. The point is to help the customer decide, not to chase a sale. Trust plays a part too. In the survey, honest advice and product knowledge were the leading trust factors. A customer who trusts the advisor is more likely to share real needs, and that is what makes the gap smaller.

7 Findings and implications

7.1 Major findings of the study

First, the gap between stated preference and actual purchase is common and well documented. It does not mean customers are dishonest. Intentions are real, but they predict behaviour only in part (Sheeran, 2002; Webb and Sheeran, 2006).

Second, preferences are often built during the buying process. A customer's first statement of needs is usually incomplete, and it becomes clearer as options, prices and advice appear.

Third, practical factors such as price, risk, too many options and timing have a strong effect at the point of purchase. They may not have been in the customer's mind when they first spoke about what they wanted.

Fourth, modern buying journeys cross several channels, so a preference recorded at one point can be outdated at the next.

Fifth, the sales process can help. Honest advice, repeated need assessment, narrowed options and relevant follow-up all seem to help customers reach decisions that suit them.

7.2 Implications for businesses and salespeople

Businesses should not rely on a single survey or a single conversation to understand customers. They should ask again at different stages, keep records of earlier discussions, and update them. Observing what customers actually do, such as which frames they try on or which properties they visit, can tell more than what they say.

Salespeople should treat concerns as information. A hesitation about price may point to a need that has not yet been voiced. Narrowing the options to a small, well-matched set, and suggesting a clear next step, can make decisions easier. Follow-up should be useful and limited, not repetitive.

In omnichannel businesses such as Lenskart, customer information should move smoothly between online and offline touchpoints, so that the customer is not asked the same questions again and the business keeps a current picture of their needs. Personalisation should still respect customer privacy.

7.3 Implications for consumers

Consumers can also benefit from knowing about the gap. It helps to write down needs and limits, such as budget and must-haves, before starting to browse, and to check these against the final choice. Taking time before a large purchase, and asking for honest advice, can reduce regret.

7.4 Scope for further research

The study is based on secondary data, so future work could collect primary data from real buyers of homes or eyewear and compare what they said before buying with what they bought. A larger and more varied sample would also give a better picture than the young, mostly student sample used in the internship survey.

8 Conclusion

The gap between what consumers say they want and what they actually buy is a normal part of buying behaviour. It appears because needs are not always clear in the beginning, because preferences take shape while people look at real options, and because price, risk, choice and timing matter more once the money is about to change hands.

The examples of real estate consultancy and eyewear retail show this in everyday terms. A couple took several conversations and a site visit to settle on a flat. A Lenskart customer may begin online, try frames at home and finish in a store. In both cases the first stated preference was only the beginning of the story.

For businesses, the lesson is to treat customer understanding as a continuing process. Asking good questions, listening to hesitation, narrowing the options, giving honest advice and following up with

care can all help customers reach choices they are happy with. This will not remove the gap completely, and no sales method can promise that. But it can make the gap smaller and make the relationship between business and customer stronger.

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