

Do Entrepreneurial Influencers Shape University Students' Entrepreneurial Intentions: Evidence from Morocco

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Abstract

The paper examines the predictors of entrepreneurial intentions among Moroccan university students, focusing on the entrepreneurial role models and influencers. The study is based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Social Learning Theory (SLT). Data collected from 272 Moroccan university students and the partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modelling method was applied. The results indicate that the entrepreneurial role models and social support predict entrepreneurial intentions, attitudinal or institutional ones. These findings demonstrate the relevance of visibility, mentorship, and experience learning in developing entrepreneurial orientations among younger generations.

Keywords: Role models; subjective norms; entrepreneurship; influencers; Morocco.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is vital to any nation as it is a key player in economic growth and the creation of new job opportunities (Rusu & Roman, 2017). In recent years, Morocco has placed a great emphasis on entrepreneurship. Morocco has recently implemented policies to encourage entrepreneurship (Ministère de l'Industrie et du Commerce, 2015). Recent data strongly suggests that the majority of entrepreneurial activity within the country is driven by need instead of opportunity. Still, entrepreneurship itself has been proved to have a bidirectional and nonlinear relation with unemployment (Faria et al., 2010). Concurrently, university-level learners in Morocco offer a distinctive and highly applicable population for the current research. As digital natives, they have been exposed to the internet and smartphones from a very young age, and their attitudes and aspirations are profoundly influenced by digital culture (Chang & Chang, 2023). This research synthesizes TPB and SLT to examine Moroccan students' entrepreneurial intentions, focusing on digital media and influencers. The study addresses the rising demand in

entrepreneurship research for a better understanding of non-traditional role models such as social media influencers (Amofah & Saladrighes, 2022; Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021).

This study contributes theoretically in several ways. It proposes and tests attitudes toward entrepreneurship influencers as a mediating factor, providing a new perspective on how influencer attributes influence entrepreneurial thinking. Moreover, it integrates the TPB model with SLT principles, closing the gap between intention and social learning at a personal level. Practically, the findings provide insights for educators, policymakers, and entrepreneurship programs aiming to strengthen student entrepreneurial engagement. Lastly, the research empowers entrepreneurial influencers by acknowledging their impact and responsibility influencing real-world entrepreneurial behavior. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 covers the literature review, and Section 3 describes the research methods and presents the results and discussion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foundation theories

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen (2011) suggests that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence an individual's intention to perform a particular behavior. TPB is one of the most used theories to explain human behavior in a variety of settings (Entrialgo and Iglesias, 2016). The Social Learning Theory (SLT) is another theory that may help understand entrepreneurial intentions. First developed by Albert Bandura (1977), it argues that individuals develop attitudes and behaviors by observing others. It is believed that individuals learn within a social environment by observing others whom they can relate to and who demonstrate strong performance in a field they are interested in or aspire to succeed in essentially, learning through example or modeling (Bosma et al., 2012). Subjective norms, attitudes towards influencers and towards entrepreneurship were borrowed from the TPB, whereas identification with the influencer and inspiring entrepreneurial role models construct stem from SLT and emphasize the idea of observational learning through attention and reproduction.

2.2. Hypotheses development

In the framework of entrepreneurial intentions, attitude can be considered as the degree to which an individual thinks positively or negatively of entrepreneurship (Pham et al., 2023). It corresponds to the extent in which people perceive entrepreneurship as satisfying and worthwhile (Nowiński and Haddoud, 2019). As revealed by the TPB (Ajzen, 2011), subjective norms represent the social pressure exerted by individuals that influence the evaluation of a certain behavior (Liu et al., 2019). Hence:

H1. Subjective Norms have a significant relationship with Attitude Towards Entrepreneurship.

Identification with an influencer is the degree to which followers recognize similarity or emotional affinity with the values, lifestyle, or persona of the influencer (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). In entrepreneurial settings, where influencers are often informal role models or educators, this identification is even more powerful in influencing followers' perceptions of their trustworthiness (Balaban et al., 2021). Followers who identify with an entrepreneurial influencer are more likely to see them as trustworthy, and identification is a strong predictor of perceived trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence that one places on a third party when they observe a certain level or reliability, honesty and believability (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Perceived trustworthiness of the influencer is the degree to which followers see an influencer as honest, credible and sincere (Coutinho et al., 2023). Based on the above, it is hypothesized that:

H2. Identification with the influencer has a significant relationship with Trustworthiness.**H3. Perceived Trustworthiness of the Influencer positively influences Attitude towards Influencers.**

According to Cohen (2001), Identification with the Influencer is an interactive and dynamic process in which individuals temporarily take on an influencer's goals, emotions, and viewpoints, going beyond mere acknowledgment of similarity in values or admiration and consists of intense intellectual and emotional identification with the influencer. On social media, they are typically engaging with entrepreneurial influencers whose success stories, failures, and transparency provide fertile ground for such identification (Lou & Kim, 2019). Therefore:

H4. Identification with the Influencer positively affects Attitude towards Entrepreneurs and Influencers.

While attitude towards influencers refers to the personal assessment an individual makes that reflects their like or dislike towards a person involved in a particular event (Mardhiah & Widodo, 2023). Entrepreneurship influencers are traditional entrepreneurs and social media users that start creating content related to their personal business (Guiñez-Cabrera et al., 2022). In the framework that influencers can be considered role models, they are expected to exert a sort of para social mentoring that will shape their followers' attitude towards entrepreneurship (D'Oria et al., 2025). Exposure to entrepreneurial role models creates an environment that feeds entrepreneurial intentions among people (Abbasianchavari and Moritz, 2021). Therefore:

H5. Attitude towards Entrepreneurship influencers positively influence Attitude towards Entrepreneurship.**H6. Inspiring entrepreneurial role models have a significant relationship with Attitudes towards entrepreneurship.**

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) is confidence in one's capacity to successfully carry out entrepreneurship tasks (Bandura, 1977). It is a powerful indicator of entrepreneurial intention which reflects an individual's determination to launch a new venture (Krueger & Carsrud, 1993). As per the Social Cognitive Theory, ESE predicts entrepreneurial intention and moderates attitude-intention relationship through its influence on difficulty management with confidence (Tiwari et al., 2017; Piperopoulos & Dimov, 2015). Besides, entrepreneurship education and mentoring have also been seen to enhance ESE, hence generating more robust intentions and entrepreneurial behavior (Santos & Liguori, 2020). We therefore presume that:

H7. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy moderates the linkage between attitude towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial intention.

Previous entrepreneurial experience refers to a person's background concerning entrepreneurship (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003). It is a key predictor of entrepreneurial capacity and attitude by way of firsthand familiarity with the entrepreneurial process (Pittaway & Cope, 2007). To this extent, entrepreneurship education also plays a central role as it evokes knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy, and subsequently, entrepreneurial attitudes and entrepreneurial intentions (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Nabi et al., 2017). Zhang et al. (2019) found individuals with prior exposure to have a stronger relationship between positive attitudes and intentions. Similarly, Malebana & Mahlaole (2023) demonstrated that entrepreneurial exposure quality and frequency strengthen the relationship through the facilitation of psychological and emotional capital necessary for the enactment of positive attitudes. Similarly, Popescu et al. (2016) established that when individuals are satisfied with entrepreneurship and find fulfillment personally, entrepreneurial intention is enhanced. Based on the above:

H8. Prior entrepreneurship exposure and/or education moderate the linkage between attitude towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial intention.

H9. Attitude towards entrepreneurship has a significant relationship with Entrepreneurship Intention.

Previous studies suggest that gender influence attitude towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial intentions (Díaz-García et al., 2010; Datta et al., 2022). Researchers argue that both female and male show similar formation of entrepreneurship intentions, however, male show more preference and interest to business creation (Feder & Nițu-Antonie, 2017). When it comes to self-efficacy, differences also exist as women tend to see themselves as less capable of launching entrepreneurial ventures due, sometimes, to societal prejudices (Dempsey and Jennings, 2014). Another moderator that is proposed is the university type that an individual attends. The environment offered by both public and private universities is different. It is then expected that entrepreneurship intentions among post-millennial cohorts will be different (Canever et al., 2017; Barral et al., 2018). Accordingly:

H10a: Gender moderates the relationship between attitude towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship intentions.

H10b: University type moderates the relationship between attitude towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship intentions.

3. Methods

Data were collected through a self-administrated questionnaire distributed to Moroccan university students (survey questions available upon request). The survey was distributed via social media platforms and in student groups using a snowball sampling technique between the period of June 2025 to July 2025. The questionnaire was formatted in both French and English and a total of 349 responses were collected, of which 272 were retained for analysis. We proceeded by analyzing the measurement model in terms of internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity to finally assessing the structural model. The sample's gender distribution is relatively balanced with 147 female respondents (54.04%) and 125 male respondents (45.96%). When it comes to age, the most common range is the 18-25 years old with 263 respondents (96.69%), followed by the 26-30 years old group with 8 respondents (2.94%), and finally the 31-40 years old group with 1 respondent (0.37%). Regarding the level of study, 84.56% are pursuing a Bachelor, 13.97% for master students, and finally 1.47% for PhD level. Regarding the type of university respondents attend, 33.82% are from public universities, 52.94% are from semi-private institutions, and 13.24% are from private ones. Finally, for the field of study, Business and Economics occupy the first place with 39.34%, followed by Science and Technology 29.78%, then 9.19% for Humanities and Social Sciences, 8.46% for Health and Medicine, Arts and Design represent 2.94%. The structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the causal relationship and assess the conceptual model. SEM is a statistical technique that uses latent variables to examine structural models (Chetioui et al., 2024). Due to the complexity of the proposed conceptual model, the use of partial least squares (PLS) was considered to be appropriate (Hair et al., 2019).

4. Results

With regards to constructing reliability, we used Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR). Our results suggest that all our constructs have reliability above 0.7, with rounding for trustworthiness, which confirms the construct's reliability. The convergent validity was assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE), that was above the threshold (0.5) for all constructs, approving the model's convergent validity. The discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT). According to the results, all HTMT values are below 0.9, which confirms the discriminant validity (The HTMT table is available upon request). Our results suggest an R-square of 0.654 for trustworthiness, 0.784 for attitude towards influencers,

0.637 for attitude towards entrepreneurship, and 0.869 for entrepreneurship intention. As expected, subjective norms have a positive and significant relationship on attitude towards entrepreneurship ($\beta=0.567$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$), supporting H1. Individuals whose environment has a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship are more likely to do so too. It was also found that subjective norms have a direct and significant relationship with entrepreneurship intentions ($\beta=0.440$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$), highlighting that social norms do not only shape attitude but can also motivate entrepreneurship intentions. Identification with the influencer, was found to significantly and positively lead to trustworthiness ($\beta=0.809$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$), supporting H2. That is when people identify with a certain influencer, they will have a higher trust level toward them. Based on the results, it is also suggested that trustworthiness has a positive and significant relationship with the attitude towards the entrepreneurship influencer ($\beta=0.898$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$), supporting H3. Conversely, identification does not have a significant relationship with the attitude towards the entrepreneurship influencer ($\beta=-0.016$, $p\text{-value} > 0.05$), rejecting H4. One explanation that was suggested by other scholars is that while people may identify with an influencer, if the latter is perceived as inauthentic or driven by profit, there won't necessarily be a positive attitude towards them (Audrezet et al., 2020). Adding to that, results show that attitude towards entrepreneurship influencers does not have a significant relationship with attitude towards entrepreneurship ($\beta=0.035$, $p\text{-value} > 0.05$), rejecting H5. This can be explained as a perceived lack of credibility towards the influencer or competency. With regards to inspiring entrepreneurial role models, results suggest that, as expected, there is a significant and positive relationship between inspiring entrepreneurial role model and attitude towards entrepreneurship ($\beta=0.229$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$), supporting H6, but there is also a positive relationship with entrepreneurship intentions ($\beta=0.178$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Which means that a role model can directly be a source of motivation for entrepreneurship intention.

Table 1. Direct & indirect effects

	Relationship		β	P-value
H1	Subjective Norms	→ Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	0.567	0.000
H2	Identification with the Entrepreneurship Influencer	→ Trustworthiness	0.809	0.000
H3	Trustworthiness	→ Attitude toward Influencer	0.898	0.002
H4	Identification with the Entrepreneurship Influencer	→ Attitude toward Influencer	-0.016	0.957
H5	Attitude toward Influencer	→ Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	0.035	0.660
H6	Inspiring Entrepreneurial Role Models	→ Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	0.229	0.014
H7	ESE* Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	→ Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	0.081	0.133
H8	PEE* Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	→ Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	0.074	0.409
H9	Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	→ Entrepreneurship Intention	0.776	0.000
H10a	Gender* Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	→ Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	-0.211	0.226

H10b	University Type* Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	→ Attitude toward Entrepreneurship	0.082	0.086
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ESE: Entrepreneurship self-efficacy; PEE: Prior Entrepreneurship Exposure/Education. Source: Authors calculations.

For the moderating effect of prior entrepreneurship education, there seems to be no significant moderation ($\beta=0.074$, $p\text{-value} > 0.05$), but results suggest a direct relationship with entrepreneurship intention ($\beta=0.240$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Self-Efficacy was also found not to have any significant role as a moderator ($\beta=0.081$, $p\text{-value} > 0.05$) but rather as directly positively influencing entrepreneurship intention ($\beta=0.176$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). This suggests that prior entrepreneurship education and self-efficacy can independently foster students' entrepreneurial intentions. University type was not found to have a significant effect as a moderator ($\beta=0.082$, $p\text{-value} > 0.05$). Gender was, on the other hand, found to have no moderating role between attitude towards entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship intention. Finally, attitude towards entrepreneurship is found to have a significant relationship with entrepreneurship intention ($\beta=0.776$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The proposed research presents a high explanatory power of entrepreneurial intention, which supports the strength of TPB. Subjective norms shape intention to entrepreneurship but also indirectly through attitudes and through entrepreneurship influences, confirming prior literature findings (Phan et al., (2023); Malebana and Mahlaole (2023)). This paper also established a difference between entrepreneurial influencers and entrepreneurial role models. Although identification with the influencers predicts its trustworthiness, attitude towards these influencers is influenced by trustworthiness and not by identification. This finding conveys the message that social identification alone is not adequate in the context of entrepreneurship, unless it comes along with credibility and genuineness which is an addition to the literature that future papers can further explore. In addition, the attitudes to influencers do not correspond to general entrepreneurial attitudes, suggesting that such use of influencers is limited in making high-risk, career-related choices. The influence of entrepreneurial role models has both indirect (through attitudes) and direct impacts on entrepreneurial intention, which highlights role modeling as a particular and a more powerful social-learning process (Add reference). Our findings also have several practical implications to higher education institutions, policymakers and other parties in the entrepreneurship ecosystem who seek to develop entrepreneurial intentions among university students. First, there is a need to create a socially supportive entrepreneurial culture. This can be attained by institutional discourses, acknowledgement of student entrepreneurs, publicity of successful alumni projects, and friendly entrepreneurial activities that promote favorable social acceptance. Second, the effectiveness of inspiring entrepreneurial role models is much

higher than that of entrepreneurship influencers in stimulating entrepreneurial intentions. Universities and support organizations must thus consider authentic and experience-based role modelling more than promotion or celebrity-based modelling. The integration of entrepreneurial figures with familiar backgrounds into the curriculum, mentoring programs, incubators, and co-curricular programs may offer students realistic experiences of entrepreneurial professions and reinforce their incentives and perseverance. Lastly, Educational programs need to be more hands-on and experiential, which may enhance competence and confidence building. The policymakers ought to invest in scalable, inclusive entrepreneurship programs that integrate social approval and credible role models to build sustainable entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions among university students.

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