

Linking Entrepreneurial Identity Aspiration and Entrepreneurial Intention in a Gender-Based Analysis among Business Students

Laila Cekule , Andrejs Cekuls 

Department of Management and Business, University of Latvia, Latvia.

How to cite: Cekule, L.; Cekuls, A. (2026). Linking Entrepreneurial Identity Aspiration and Entrepreneurial Intention in a Gender-Based Analysis among Business Students. In: 12th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'26). Valencia, 15-18 June 2026. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd26.2026.21825>

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention among business students, with attention to gender-related differences. The results show that entrepreneurial identity aspiration is strongly associated with entrepreneurial intention, alongside observable variation in entrepreneurial intention across gender groups. The results indicate that entrepreneurial identity aspiration exerts a very strong and statistically significant positive effect on entrepreneurial intention ($r = .829$, $p < .01$), underscoring its central role in intention formation among business students. Gender-based analysis reveals that male students report significantly higher levels of entrepreneurial intention than female students ($t(443) = -6.939$, $p < .001$); however, this difference appears primarily at the descriptive level. Further analysis indicates that gender does not directly predict entrepreneurial intention when identity-related factors are considered, with entrepreneurial identity aspiration emerging as the primary explanatory factor.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial intention; entrepreneurial identity aspiration; gender; entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship education.

1. Introduction

The gender dimension remains one of the most contested issues in entrepreneurship research. Research indicates that the entrepreneurial role has historically been associated with masculinized attributes, such as autonomy, risk-taking, and dominance, which shape how individuals identify with entrepreneurial identity (Stead, 2017). According to doing-gender theory, gender is enacted through adherence to role expectations, and entrepreneurship has historically been seen as a “male” domain (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Although earlier studies consistently reported differences between women’s and men’s entrepreneurial intentions (EI), more recent empirical analyses point to a more nuanced picture: gender itself is no longer a

determinative factor, but rather exerts its influence through identity narratives, social expectations, and perceptions of self-efficacy (Alsos et al., 2022). Among business students, whose professional identities are still forming, educational environments that increasingly promote gender-neutral participation may contribute to a reduction in traditional gender differences in entrepreneurial intention; however, differences persist in how individuals construct and align with the entrepreneurial role. Entrepreneurial identity aspiration (EIA) thus emerges as a conceptual bridge between gender and entrepreneurial intention. It enables analysis not of whether women and men wish to become entrepreneurs, but of how they construct the entrepreneurial role and the extent to which this role is perceived as compatible with their self-identity.

2. Theoretical background

Conceptualizing Students as Potential Entrepreneurs

Recent research suggests that university students constitute a particularly relevant population for examining entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention. Empirical evidence indicates that, especially in developed economies, younger generations increasingly favour self-employment and business ownership over traditional salaried employment (Bruton et al., 2021). This trend coincides with the typical age of university students, which corresponds to a critical developmental period for identity formation (Erikson, 1968). University education is widely recognized as a context in which identity-related processes intensify, as students actively engage in questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who will I become?” (Moshman, 2005). During this stage, professional aspirations and identity construction evolve simultaneously, making students especially receptive to entrepreneurial role exploration. Research conducted in Latvia (Bernat et al., 2009; Šavriņa, 2013) further demonstrates that entrepreneurship education can foster students’ engagement in entrepreneurial activity, while also contributing to broader socioeconomic goals such as reducing youth unemployment and emigration risks. Despite this growing emphasis on entrepreneurship education, prior research consistently reports gender-related variation in entrepreneurial intention. Meta-analyses and cross-national studies indicate that female students, on average, exhibit lower entrepreneurial intentions than male students (e.g., Overwien et al., 2024). Qualitative research suggests that such differences are not merely individual level phenomena but are embedded in broader social contexts.

Doing-Gender Theory as a Lens for Gendered Entrepreneurial Identity and Intention

Empirical research consistently documents gender differences in entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention among university students, suggesting the presence of a persistent - though nuanced - gender gap. According to doing-gender theory, gender is not a fixed individual attribute, but an ongoing social accomplishment enacted through adherence to role expectations, and entrepreneurship has historically been constructed as a “male” domain

(West & Zimmerman, 1987). From this perspective, gender is continuously “done” through everyday actions, behaviors, and role performances that align with socially embedded expectations regarding appropriate conduct for women and men. Individuals therefore adapt their behavior to dominant gender norms to achieve social recognition as gender-congruent actors.

Large-scale quantitative studies indicate that male students tend to report significantly higher levels of entrepreneurial intention than their female counterparts (Köpke & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2025). Notably, perceived behavioural control and parental role models emerged as strong predictors of EI for women, but not for men, indicating that women’s entrepreneurial intentions are more contingent on contextual and relational factors. Furthermore, Köpke et al. demonstrate that perceived behavioural control plays a more pronounced role in predicting entrepreneurial intention among women than among men, indicating that women may translate confidence into entrepreneurial intention more effectively once their entrepreneurial identity is sufficiently established. These countervailing results indicate that supportive educational environments, exposure to entrepreneurship education, and broader cultural shifts can strengthen women’s entrepreneurial identities and intentions.

3. Hypothesis Development and Research design

Building on identity-based and social-cognitive perspectives, this study conceptualizes entrepreneurial intention among students as the outcome of both background characteristics and identity-related psychological mechanisms. The following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: There are statistically significant differences in entrepreneurial intention between male and female business students.

H2: Entrepreneurial identity aspiration is positively and significantly related to entrepreneurial intention among business students.

In line with the theoretical framework, entrepreneurial identity aspiration is treated as the central mechanism in the formation of entrepreneurial intention, while gender is examined as a background characteristic whose role is assessed at the descriptive level.

4. Methods

Data Collection and Sample

The questionnaire comprised established measurement instruments assessing entrepreneurial intention, entrepreneurial identity aspiration, and gender. Responses were recorded using a combination of dichotomous nominal measures (yes/no) and a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“does not describe me at all”) to 6 (“describes me completely”). The target population

comprised university students who met the following criteria: (1) individuals not currently involved in the legal establishment of a new venture, as such individuals are typically classified as nascent entrepreneurs; (2) individuals who had not been granted self-employed status; and (3) students enrolled in higher education institutions in Latvia within the field of Social Sciences (ISCED field 5), specifically in Economics and Business (field 5.2). The final sample consisted of 449 valid responses, which provided sufficient statistical power for correlational, regression, and group comparison analyses.

Measures

Entrepreneurial intention was assessed using the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire (EIQ), Version 3.1 (Liñán & Chen, 2009), which is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The scale exhibited strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.931$), indicating a high level of reliability. Entrepreneurial identity aspiration was measured using an adapted version of the Identity Aspiration scale developed by Farmer et al. (2003), based on role identity theory. The scale captures the extent to which becoming an entrepreneur is integrated into an individual's self-concept and future-oriented identity. The scale exhibited very high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.913$). Gender was included as a dichotomous variable and used as a grouping variable in the analysis to examine differences in entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial identity aspiration.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics (Version 17.0). Pearson's correlation analysis was employed to examine linear relationships between entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention. Mediation effects were tested using regression analysis following the four-step procedure proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). In addition, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to assess mean differences between gender groups.

5. Results

Descriptive statistics for the main study variables are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that the overall level of entrepreneurial intention among the respondents was moderate to high ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.44$), with values spanning the full range of the measurement scale. These descriptive indicators provide an initial overview of the distributional properties of the key dependent variable.

Table 1. The indicators of descriptive statistics. Source: Author's calculations using IBM SPSS Statistics software

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
VAR00010	449	1,00	6,00	3,7528	1,440445

The characteristics of the quantitative research sample are summarized in Table 2. The sample consisted predominantly of female students (62.7%), with male students accounting for 37.3% of respondents. Most participants were aged 25 years or below and were enrolled in bachelor's-level study programs.

Table 2. Characteristics of the quantitative research sample. Source: Created by the authors

Variable	Category	Count	% of Total
Gender	Male	175	37,3
Gender	Female	294	62,7
Age	25 or below	436	93,0
Age	26 or above	33	7,0
Study Program	Bachelor's Studies	421	89,8
Study Program	Master's Studies	48	10,2
Current Involvement in Establishing the Legal Status of a New Venture	yes	10	4,7
	no	459	95,3
Self-Employment Status	yes	20	9,4
	no	449	90,6
A Family Member Is an entrepreneur	yes	193	41,2
	no	276	58,8
Intention to Start a Business Within the Next 5 Years	yes	286	61,0
	no	183	39,0
Knowledge About Starting a Business	yes	137	29,2
	no	332	70,8

Most respondents were not involved in the legal establishment of a new venture and did not hold self-employed status, indicating that the sample primarily consisted of individuals at a pre-venture stage, while a substantial proportion reported having an entrepreneur in the family and an intention to start a business within the next five years, reflecting meaningful variation in entrepreneurial exposure and aspirations.

To examine whether statistically significant differences in entrepreneurial intention exist between genders, an independent-samples t-test was conducted. As shown in Table 3, male students ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.25$) reported significantly higher levels of entrepreneurial intention than female students ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.43$).

Table 3. Independent-Samples t-Test Results for Gender Differences in Entrepreneurial Intention.

Source: Author's calculations using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean	% of Total N
Female	3.49	1.43	0.09	63.4
Male	4.43	1.25	0.10	36.6
Total	3.84	1.44	0.07	100.0

Note. Entrepreneurial intention measured on a six-point Likert scale. Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents within each gender category.

Assumption	F	p	t	df	p	Mean	SE	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
n	(Levene)				(two-tailed)	Difference			
Equal variances assumed	0.95	.331	-6.94	443	< .001	-0.93	0.13	-1.20	-0.67
Equal variances not assumed			-7.20	376.42	< .001	-0.93	0.13	-1.19	-0.68

Note. Entrepreneurial intention is the dependent variable. Levene's test indicates that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met ($p = .331$); therefore, results assuming equal variances are reported. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

Levene's test for equality of variances indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met ($F = 0.950$, $p = .331$); therefore, results from the t -test assuming equal variances were interpreted. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(443) = -6.939$, $p < .001$. The mean difference was -0.93 , with a 95% confidence interval of $[-1.19, -0.67]$, indicating that male students' entrepreneurial intention was significantly higher than that of female students. Consequently, the hypothesis stating that no statistically significant gender differences in entrepreneurial intention exist was not supported. Correlation analysis further revealed a very strong positive relationship between entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention ($r = .829$, $p < .01$), as presented in Table 4. This result indicates that higher levels of entrepreneurial identity aspiration are closely associated with stronger entrepreneurial intentions among students.

Table 4. Correlation between entrepreneurial identity aspiration (EIA) and entrepreneurial intention (EI). Source: Authors' research

		EIA	EI
EIA	Pearson Correlation	1	.829**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	< .001
	N	444	440
EI	Pearson Correlation	.829**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	-
	N	440	445

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

N = number of respondents; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The proportion of missing values across variables was assessed based on their relative frequency and was found to be low, suggesting no systematic bias due to missing data.

These findings provide strong empirical support for the hypothesis that entrepreneurial identity aspiration is positively and significantly related to students' entrepreneurial intention. The results underscore the central role of identity-based mechanisms in the formation of

entrepreneurial intention, while also revealing descriptive gender differences at the bivariate level.

6. Discussion

The findings provide several important insights that contribute to the ongoing debate on gender differences in entrepreneurial intention and the mechanisms underlying intention formation. The results reveal a very strong positive association between entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention. This finding supports identity-based approaches to entrepreneurship, which argue that intentions are not solely the outcome of rational evaluations or demographic characteristics but are deeply embedded in individuals' self-concepts and future-oriented identities. Students who strongly aspire to see themselves as future entrepreneurs report significantly higher entrepreneurial intentions, underscoring the central role of identity aspiration as a motivational driver in the pre-venture stage. This result is consistent with prior research emphasizing entrepreneurial identity as a key antecedent of intention and extends this literature by empirically confirming the strength of this relationship within a student population. The independent-samples t-test indicates that, at the bivariate level, male students report significantly higher entrepreneurial intention than female students. This finding is consistent with prior empirical and meta-analytic research documenting gender differences in entrepreneurial intentions among students and early-career individuals (Köpke & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2025; Overwien et al., 2024). At the same time, entrepreneurship scholarship increasingly emphasizes that such differences should not be interpreted as inherent or biologically determined, but rather as outcomes of socially embedded processes and gendered expectations (Alsos et al., 2022; West & Zimmerman, 1987). When interpreted in conjunction with the strong association between entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention observed in this study, the gender difference detected at the bivariate level appears secondary rather than fundamental. From an identity-theoretical perspective, entrepreneurial intentions emerge through processes of role internalization and identity development (Erikson, 1959; Farmer et al., 2003). In this context, gender functions as a social positioning that shapes access to, and identification with, entrepreneurial roles, rather than as a direct determinant of intention. This interpretation aligns with process-oriented views of entrepreneurship, which conceptualize entrepreneurial outcomes as the result of dynamic interactions between individual identities and contextual conditions (Bruton et al., 2021). The findings support contemporary perspectives that call for moving beyond simple gender comparisons toward a more nuanced understanding of how entrepreneurial intentions are formed through identity-related mechanisms.

7. Theoretical and practical implications

The study strengthens identity-based explanations of entrepreneurial intention by demonstrating that entrepreneurial identity aspiration is not merely a complementary factor, but a central mechanism in the formation of entrepreneurial intentions among business students. The strong link between entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention suggests that educational interventions should move beyond skill development and knowledge transfer to actively support the formation of entrepreneurial identities.

References

- Alsos, G. A., Hytti, U., & Ljunggren, E. (2022). Gender and entrepreneurship: Revealing mechanisms and processes. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 46(5), 1047–1070.
- Bernat, T., Korpysa, J., Grundey, D., Šavriņa, B., Bilan, Y., & Koren, A. (2009). Researching students' entrepreneurship skills in post-socialist countries: A multi-country survey (Part 2). *Transformations in Business & Economics*, 8(3), 104–130.
- Bruton, G. D., Zahra, S. A., Van de Ven, A. H., & Hitt, M. A. (2021). Entrepreneurship as a process. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 35(4), 599–622.
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle* (Psychological Issues, Monograph 1). International University Press.
- Farmer, S. M., Tierney, P., & Kung-McIntyre, K. (2003). Employee creativity in Taiwan: An application of role identity theory. *Academy of Management Journal*, 46(5), 618–630. <https://doi.org/10.2307/30040653>
- Köpke, U., & Schmitt-Rodermund, E. (2025). Why more males? Differences in entrepreneurial intentions of male and female university students and graduates. *Journal of Global Entrepreneurship Research*, 15(1), 23.
- Liñán, F., & Chen, Y.-W. (2009). Development and cross-cultural application of a specific instrument to measure entrepreneurial intentions. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 33(3), 593–617. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2009.00318.x>
- Moshman, D. (2005). *Adolescent psychological development: Rationality, morality, and identity*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Overwien, B., Nowiński, W., & Haddoud, M. Y. (2024). Gender differences in entrepreneurial intentions: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Small Business Management*. Advance online publication.
- Stead, V. (2017). Belonging and women entrepreneurs: Women's navigation of gendered assumptions in entrepreneurial practice. *International Small Business Journal*, 35(1), 61–77.
- Šavriņa, B. (2013). Transition to the market economy and the changes in education: The case of the Baltic States and Latvia in particular. *Proceedings of the 1st Eurasian Multidisciplinary Forum (EMF 2013)*, 75–83.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–151.