

Pre-Entrepreneurial Behaviour as a Pathway between Entrepreneurial Identity Aspiration and Entrepreneurial Intention

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between entrepreneurial identity aspiration, pre-entrepreneurial behaviour, entrepreneurial intention, and perceived behavioural control among university students. Using survey data from 449 students and applying Pearson correlation analysis, the results reveal strong and statistically significant positive associations among the key constructs. Entrepreneurial identity aspiration is strongly correlated with pre-entrepreneurial behaviour ($r = .814$, $p < .001$) and entrepreneurial intention ($r = .829$, $p < .001$). Pre-entrepreneurial behaviour shows a substantial positive relationship with entrepreneurial intention ($r = .723$, $p < .001$) and a moderate-to-strong association with perceived behavioural control ($r = .612$, $p < .001$). Rather than reflecting a linear causal process, the results suggest a dynamic configuration in which identity aspiration, behavioural readiness, and perceived control are closely intertwined in the early stages of the entrepreneurial process.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial identity aspiration; entrepreneurial intention; pre-entrepreneurial behaviour; perceived behavioural control; business students.*

1. Introduction

Recent longitudinal research highlights that entrepreneurial identity aspiration (EIA) is a relatively stable, identity-based construct that serves as a persistent driver of entrepreneurial engagement over time (Belchior & Castro-Silva, 2023). In contrast, entrepreneurial intention (EI) is dynamic and context-sensitive, evolving throughout students' studies and not fixed at entry (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2013). Although EI reflects a conscious commitment to start a business, its translation into action depends on sustained motivation and is strongly conditioned by perceived behavioural control (PBC), as higher self-efficacy and resource confidence increase the likelihood of enactment (Harima et al., 2021; Duong & Vu, 2023). EIA

complements EI by reflecting an internalised vision of oneself as an entrepreneur, which motivates individuals to engage already in pre-entrepreneurial behaviour (PEB), including opportunity exploration, skill development, and networking. Such pre-entrepreneurial activities within the study process function as a mechanism through which students actively enact the entrepreneurial role, translating identity aspirations into concrete experience while simultaneously strengthening both their entrepreneurial self-concept and intention, in line with possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Alongside EI and EIA, PEB has emerged as a distinct behavioural dimension of the early entrepreneurial process, capturing individuals' proactive engagement with entrepreneurial tasks prior to venture formation (Othman et al., 2022; Sieger et al., 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that pre-entrepreneurial behaviour is positively associated with both EIA and EI, with stronger identity aspirations and intentions linked to greater engagement in preparatory entrepreneurial activities (Mei & Symaco, 2022; Seo et al., 2024). Rather than implying a mediating mechanism, these associations reflect a pattern of behavioural readiness and entrepreneurial role enactment characteristic of the pre-venture phase (Duong, 2025; Harima et al., 2021).

2. Theoretical background

Entrepreneurship education creates an environment in which students acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge that supports the formation of an EI. Experiential learning further contributes to the dynamic development of entrepreneurial identity, as engagement with real-life situations, hands-on involvement, and reflection help individuals recognise themselves as potential entrepreneurs (e.g., Kolb, 2015). In this process, educational experiences may also strengthen students' 'perceived behavioural control by enhancing their confidence in their entrepreneurial capabilities, thereby encouraging engagement in pre-entrepreneurial activities through which they begin to explore entrepreneurial roles and practices prior to venture creation. Several studies indicate that when entrepreneurship education lacks practical depth, it may intensify decisional conflict by creating a gap between abstract knowledge and entrepreneurial reality (Mungai & Velamuri, 2011; Mei & Symaco, 2022). In such cases, students' engagement in pre-entrepreneurial activities tends to remain limited, weakening the link between learning, identity development, and early entrepreneurial action. An overly instrumental and tool-focused approach may further constrain deeper engagement with the entrepreneurial role, as excessive emphasis on procedures and frameworks limits reflective learning and the development of a coherent entrepreneurial self-concept (Mungai & Velamuri, 2011; Mei & Symaco, 2022). As a result, students may perceive entrepreneurship mainly as a set of techniques rather than a role- and identity-driven process, which can reduce entrepreneurial identity aspiration and sustained involvement in pre-entrepreneurial activities. Identity-based perspectives suggest that sustained engagement is more likely when activities align with individuals' self-concept and future-oriented identity aspirations (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Obschonka et al., 2019). Without such

alignment, pre-entrepreneurial activities risk being experienced as isolated academic tasks rather than meaningful career steps. Therefore, the depth and persistence of engagement depend not only on skill acquisition but also on how effectively educational experiences support entrepreneurial identity formation and role enactment (Murnieks et al., 2014; Harima et al., 2021). According to Locke and Latham (1991), goals and actions evolve through feedback loops, as individuals adjust their behaviour based on external and experiential feedback to move closer to intention realisation; however, negative feedback may create decisional conflict and delay action. In the entrepreneurial context, this dynamic is particularly salient during pre-entrepreneurial behaviour, where early activities provide signals about feasibility, competence, and role fit, prompting reflection and adjustment of both entrepreneurial identity aspiration and entrepreneurial intention, as future-oriented identity images guide present behaviour (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Positive feedback strengthens confidence and intention, whereas misaligned feedback may increase uncertainty and hesitation. Pre-entrepreneurial behaviour represents a developmental phase in which entrepreneurial identity aspiration and intention are iteratively shaped through experience and feedback. Students who actively develop business ideas demonstrate higher motivation, greater readiness to initiate entrepreneurial activity, and stronger engagement with social networks (Yao et al., 2016; Seibert et al., 2021). From a theoretical perspective, human capital and learning theories highlight the role of educational and environmental stimuli in fostering such behaviour, with higher levels of accumulated knowledge and skills increasing preparedness and early entrepreneurial engagement (Othman et al., 2022). In parallel, self-efficacy theory posits that individuals' capability beliefs shape both behaviour and future intentions (Bandura, 1997), and empirical evidence shows that higher perceived behavioural control is associated with greater involvement in information search, planning, and experimentation prior to venture creation. Furthermore, entrepreneurial identity aspiration motivates engagement in pre-entrepreneurial activities - particularly opportunity recognition and idea generation - as individuals seek to enact a future entrepreneurial role (Hamrick et al., 2024; Seibert et al., 2021; Gregori et al., 2021). Consistently, students who engage in such activities are more likely to progress toward the development of viable business models (Botezat et al., 2022; Xanthopoulou & Sahinidis, 2023).

3. Hypothesis Development and Research design

Building on the theoretical foundations of entrepreneurial intention, entrepreneurial identity, and pre-entrepreneurial behaviour, this study formulates three hypotheses that capture the relationships among the key constructs of interest. Prior research indicates that entrepreneurial identity aspiration (EIA) acts as a motivational driver that encourages engagement in early-stage entrepreneurial activities. As an internalised desire to assume the entrepreneurial role, EIA is expressed through pre-entrepreneurial behaviours such as opportunity recognition and idea

generation, enabling individuals to explore and enact the role before venture creation. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between entrepreneurial identity aspiration and students' engagement in pre-entrepreneurial activities.

Pre-entrepreneurial behaviour is widely recognised as an early manifestation of the entrepreneurial process and is closely linked to the formation of entrepreneurial intention. Students who engage in idea exploration, opportunity evaluation, and preparatory actions are more likely to develop clearer and more persistent intentions to start a business.

H2: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between students' pre-entrepreneurial behaviour and entrepreneurial intention.

Pre-entrepreneurial behaviour is linked to perceived behavioural control, reflecting students' confidence in their ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks. Higher perceived control increases the likelihood of engaging in early entrepreneurial activities.

H3: Pre-entrepreneurial behaviour is positively associated with students' perceived entrepreneurial behavioural control.

The study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, aimed at empirically testing the proposed hypotheses by examining the relationships among the study variables.

4. Methods

The sample comprised 449 students from the University of Latvia, predominantly female (62.7%) and aged 25 or younger (93.0%). Most were enrolled in Bachelor's programmes (89.8%), with 10.2% at Master's level. Only a small proportion reported current entrepreneurial involvement (4.7% establishing a venture; 9.4% self-employed). Notably, 41.2% had a family member who is an entrepreneur. While 61.0% intended to start a business within five years, only 29.2% reported possessing business start-up knowledge. All constructs were measured on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = "does not describe me at all", 6 = "describes me completely"). Entrepreneurial intention was assessed using the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire (EIQ; Liñán & Chen, 2009; $\alpha = 0.931$). Entrepreneurial identity aspiration was measured with the Identity Aspiration scale (Farmer et al., 2003; $\alpha = 0.913$). Pre-entrepreneurial behaviour was measured using the Nascent Entrepreneurial Behaviours instrument (Farmer et al., 2011), focusing on the early-stage idea exploration dimension (e.g., idea generation and opportunity evaluation), which demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.919$).

5. Results

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the principal variables examined in this study. The findings show that respondents reported a moderately high degree of entrepreneurial intention ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.44$), with responses covering the entire scale range. These statistics

offer a preliminary insight into the central tendency and variability of the study's main dependent construct.

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

Pearson correlation analysis showed strong, statistically significant positive relationships among entrepreneurial identity aspiration, pre-entrepreneurial behaviour, entrepreneurial intention, and perceived behavioural control ($p < .001$). Missing cases were excluded automatically in SPSS; the proportion of missing data was below 10%, indicating a low level of missingness (Shantal et al., 2023; Widaman, 2006).

Table 2. Pearson Correlations Among Entrepreneurial Identity Aspiration (EIA), Pre-Entrepreneurial Behaviour (PEB), Entrepreneurial Intention (EI), and Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC). Author's calculations using IBM SPSS Statistics

Variable	Statistic	EIA	PEB	EI	PBC
EIA	Pearson	1	,814**	,829**	,720**
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	—	< ,001	< ,001	< ,001
PEB	N	444	434	440	428
	Pearson	,814**	1	,723**	,612**
	Correlation				
EI	Sig. (2-tailed)	< ,001	—	< ,001	< ,001
	N	434	434	430	432
	Pearson	,829**	,723**	1	,688**
PBC	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< ,001	< ,001	—	< ,001
	N	440	430	445	426
	Pearson	,720**	,612**	,688**	1
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< ,001	< ,001	< ,001	—
	N	428	432	426	445

Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). **

Consistent with H1, entrepreneurial identity aspiration shows a very strong positive correlation with pre-entrepreneurial behaviour ($r = .814$, $p < .001$, $N = 434$). This result indicates that students who more strongly aspire to an entrepreneurial identity are substantially more likely to engage in pre-entrepreneurial activities, such as idea exploration and opportunity recognition. The strength of this association suggests that entrepreneurial identity aspiration is closely aligned with early entrepreneurial engagement, supporting the view that identity-related

motivations play a central role in shaping pre-venture behaviour. Support is also found for H2, as pre-entrepreneurial behaviour is strongly and positively associated with entrepreneurial intention ($r = .723$, $p < .001$, $N = 430$). This finding implies that students who actively engage in preparatory entrepreneurial activities tend to report clearer and more robust intentions to start a business. The magnitude of the correlation underscores the importance of behavioural engagement in the early stages of the entrepreneurial process, suggesting that pre-entrepreneurial behaviour is closely linked to intention formation. The results support H3, showing a moderate-to-strong positive relationship between pre-entrepreneurial behaviour and perceived behavioural control ($r = .612$, $p < .001$), indicating that students who feel more capable are more likely to engage in early entrepreneurial activities, which in turn may further strengthen their confidence. Entrepreneurial identity aspiration is very strongly related to entrepreneurial intention ($r = .829$, $p < .001$), while entrepreneurial intention is also strongly associated with perceived behavioural control ($r = .688$, $p < .001$), consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The findings indicate that identity aspiration, pre-entrepreneurial behaviour, entrepreneurial intention, and perceived behavioural control form a tightly interconnected system.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that EIA is strongly embedded in students' early entrepreneurial engagement, as reflected in its very strong association with pre-entrepreneurial behaviour (PEB). This pattern is consistent with recent research positioning EIA as a proximal motivational driver that encourages individuals to enact a future entrepreneurial role through opportunity exploration and idea generation (e.g., Hamrick et al., 2024). The strong relationship between PEB and EI suggests that behavioural engagement plays a central role in the formation and strengthening of entrepreneurial intentions. Students who actively engage in preparatory entrepreneurial activities demonstrate clearer and more persistent intentions to start a business, which aligns with recent findings that early-stage engagement facilitates progression toward venture development and strengthens intentional commitment (e.g., Xanthopoulou & Sahinidis, 2023). The observed association between PEB and PBC reflects the reciprocal relationship between capability beliefs and behavioural engagement. In line with self-efficacy theory, students who perceive themselves as more capable are more likely to engage in pre-entrepreneurial activities, while such engagement further reinforces their confidence in entrepreneurial tasks (Bandura, 1997; Duong, 2025). The strong link between EI and PBC further corresponds with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, highlighting perceived control as a key determinant of intention formation. The results indicate that EIA, PEB, EI, and PBC form a tightly interconnected system in which identity-based aspirations, behavioural engagement, perceived capability, and intentional commitment mutually reinforce one another. In line with contemporary framework Theory of Planned Behaviour, pre-entrepreneurial behaviour appears

to function as a central behavioural mechanism linking identity aspirations with entrepreneurial intention within the higher education context (Bui et al., 2025; Duong, 2025).

7. Theoretical and practical implications

The findings suggest that models of entrepreneurial intention may benefit from placing greater emphasis on behavioural readiness and identity enactment, particularly in educational settings. Rather than focusing exclusively on intention as a predictor of future behaviour, the results underscore the value of examining how students actively engage with entrepreneurial roles before formal venture creation. Educational programmes that encourage students to explore entrepreneurial roles through experiential activities may simultaneously strengthen entrepreneurial identity aspiration.

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