



Exploring the intention–behavior link in student entrepreneurship: Moderating effects of individual and environmental characteristics



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 April 2015

Received in revised form

13 October 2015

Accepted 11 December 2015

Available online 29 December 2015

Keywords:

Entrepreneurial intentions

Start-up activities

Intention–behavior link

Intention–action gap

Student entrepreneurship

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial intentions lie at the foundation of entrepreneurial process. Yet the available evidence suggests that not every entrepreneurial intention is eventually transformed into actual behavior – starting and operating a new venture. Although studies in other research domains suggest high level of intention–behavior correlation, the studies of intention–behavior relationship in entrepreneurship are scarce. Using the data from the 2013/2014 Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' Survey, we scrutinize the intention–action gap among student entrepreneurs, attributing it to the contextual factors, i.e., individual (family entrepreneurial background, age, gender) and environmental characteristics (university environment, uncertainty avoidance), affecting the translation of entrepreneurial intentions into entrepreneurial actions.

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1. Introduction

Organizational emergence is usually considered as a key outcome of entrepreneurship (Aldrich, 1999; Gartner, 1985; Katz & Gartner, 1988; Shane & Delmar, 2004). Entrepreneurship scholars agree that organizational emergence is a process made up of multiple start-up activities (Carter, Shaver, & Gartner, 1996; Liao, Welsch, & Tan, 2005; Newbert, 2005). Given the central role of actions in entrepreneurship, previous studies have argued and shown that the entrepreneurial process occurs because people are motivated to pursue and exploit perceived opportunities (e.g., Osiyevskyy & Dewald, 2015). This view is rooted in the theory that entrepreneurial action is intentional, resulting from motivation and cognition (Frese, 2009; Kautonen, Van Gelderen, & Tornikoski, 2013; Kolvereid & Isaksen, 2006; Krueger, 2005). The starting point of an action is the formation of a goal intention (Bird, 1988; Locke & Latham, 2002). Social psychology scholars define

intentions as cognitive states immediately prior to the decision to act (Theory of Planned Behavior: Ajzen, 1991; Theory of reasoned action: Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; see also Krueger, 2005 in application to entrepreneurship). Across a wide range of different behaviors, behavioral intentions have been identified as the most immediate predictor of actual behaviors (see the meta-analyses of Armitage & Conner, 2001; Sheeran, 2002).

Yet not all intentions are translated into actions. Conceptual and empirical analyses of the intention–behavior relationship have revealed that the 'gap' between intention and action can mainly be attributed to persons who intend to act, but fail to realize their intentions (Orbell & Sheeran, 1998; Sheeran, 2002; Sniehotta, Scholz, Schwarzer, & Schüz 2005). Although there is abundant evidence from other research domains on high level of intention–behavior correlation (Ajzen, Czasch, & Flood, 2009; Armitage & Conner, 2001), there are few studies done on the intention–behavior relationship in entrepreneurship (Kautonen et al., 2013). This sets the motivation for the current study.

In several studies on intention–behavior link in entrepreneurship, intentions are measured several months or even years prior to the measurement of behavior (Gielnik et al., 2014; Kautonen et al., 2013). There is literally a 'time gap' between intentions and behavior. Yet, as Sutton (1998) claims, "If intentions change over time and this change is differential (i.e., different individuals

Abbreviations: GUESSS, Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' Survey; GEM, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor; PSED, Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics.

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change by different amounts), a distal measure of intention (i.e., distal with respect to the behavior) will be poorer predictor of behavior than will a proximal measure of intention” (Sutton, 1998: 1326). Thus the longer the interval between the measurement of intention and behavior, the greater the likelihood that unforeseen events will occur leading to changes in intention. Thus, in the current study we concentrate on other, additional moderators of intentions-actions translation (individual and contextual), beyond the showed before temporal aspect.

Entrepreneurship becomes more and more attractive for people who are about to make their career choice, as this perspective allows participation in the labor market while keeping personal freedom (Martinez, Mora, & Vila, 2007).¹ The available evidence suggests that a rather large segment of the population intends to pursue an entrepreneurial career while they are relatively young. Therefore, student entrepreneurship is an important direction of entrepreneurship research, as at this stage of life entrepreneurial conscience and attitude towards entrepreneurial career are formed. Student entrepreneurship is defined as any attempt to launch a new venture undertaken by one or several students (Reynolds, 2005). Students' involvement in entrepreneurial activity depends on their career plans and attitude toward self-employment, which are contingent on various factors.

Therefore, in this article we examine the intention–behavior link using a sample of university students. We focus on the role of entrepreneurial intentions as drivers of the start-up activities, particularly scrutinizing the moderating effects of individual characteristics and environmental peculiarities on the intentions-actions translation. To examine the relationship between intentions and start-up activities of students empirically, we use the 2013/2014 “Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' Survey” (GUESS) dataset. We demonstrate that intention plays a critical role in university students' entrepreneurial activity. However, the effect of intention on the scope of start-up activities may be contingent on students' individual background and the environment in which they operate. Hence, we focus on students' age, gender, family entrepreneurial background, university entrepreneurial environment, and the overall level of societal uncertainty avoidance, positing that these peculiarities moderate the relationship between entrepreneurial intentions and intensity of actual actions.

Our study provides a number of contributions. First, the study contributes to the overall entrepreneurship literature by increasing our understanding of how different individual and environmental characteristics influence the relationship between entrepreneurial intentions and start-up activities of student entrepreneurs.

Second, our study extends the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) in entrepreneurship context, suggesting that the transformation of intentions into actions may be dependent on certain contingencies that should be taken into account while studying the intention-action gap, particularly in entrepreneurship.

The paper proceeds as follows. We start by presenting our conceptual framework and hypotheses, rooted in the studies of social psychology and entrepreneurial cognition. We then move to a description of our sample, methodology, and present our empirical insights. Next we discuss our findings and then conclude with the implications and limitations of our research.

¹ According to a recent “Global Entrepreneurship Monitor” (GEM, 2014) report, entrepreneurial intentions most frequently emerge among individuals aged 25–35 years old. This is consistent with Lévesque and Minniti (2006; 2011), who found that the majority of people who start a business fall into this age interval. Among those who plan to launch a business in the nearest 3 years, young individuals aged 18–24 years old account for 21.3%.

2. Theory and research hypotheses

2.1. Intention–behavior link in entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial intentions are defined as the commitment to start a new business (Krueger, 1993), and they serve as key antecedents of entrepreneurial behavior. Based on the seminal framework of Shane and Venkataraman (2000), entrepreneurship behavior can be defined as the ‘discovery, evaluation and exploitation of an opportunity.’ Any type of behavior is comprised of a range of actions made by individuals in conjunction with personal preferences and external conditions. In line with the underlying Theory of Planned Behavior, Van Gelderen et al. (2008) demonstrated that entrepreneurial intentions of students and, as a consequence, their entrepreneurial behavior, are shaped by their attitude towards entrepreneurship. In other words, actions aimed at starting a new business are intentional – rather than spontaneous – and are determined by students' attitudes, which arise as the results of multiple influences, such as personal traits and situational factors (Ajzen, 1991; Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000).

In the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) framework, intention is a function of three antecedents: a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior (attitude), perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior (subjective norm), and the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior (Perceived Behavioral Control, PBC) (Ajzen, 1991). Similarly to its predecessor, the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the TPB further posits that intention provides a cognitive link between the three antecedents and subsequent behavior (Kautonen et al., 2013). The strength of intention captures motivational factors influencing people's behavior, and reflects the amounts of effort people are willing to invest (Bird, 1988; Gielnik et al., 2014). Prior empirical studies in different research domains, including entrepreneurship, support the predictive power of intentions on the subsequent behavior. In meta-analytic review of studies using the Theory of Planned Behavior, Armitage and Conner (2001) find that behavioral intentions explain 27% of the variance in behavior. The meta-analysis of meta-analyses by Sheeran (2002) reveals that across a variety of domains, intentions predict on average 28% of variance in subsequent behavior. More recently, Kautonen, Van Gelderen and Fink (2013) demonstrated the robustness and relevance of the TPB in the prediction of business start-up intentions and subsequent behavior based on longitudinal survey data. Consequently, based on the theoretical arguments of the TPB and the available empirical evidence, we propose that the cognitive variable, entrepreneurial intentions, has a significant positive impact on the level of engagement in start-up behaviors:

Hypothesis 1. Entrepreneurial intention is positively related to the scope of start-up activities undertaken by student entrepreneurs.

Yet the above cited studies of the TPB find that the intentions-actions link is far from perfect (correlations reported in entrepreneurship context rarely exceed 30%, suggesting around 10% of the shared variance between intentions and actions). This justifies the key focus of the current study – the contextual factors underpinning the intentions-actions gap with respect to start-up process. Theoretically, we suggest that the correlation between entrepreneurial intentions and entrepreneurial behaviors is substantively affected by individual and environmental moderators.

2.2. Individual background differences as moderators

The readiness to shift from entrepreneurial intentions to real

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