



Gender differences in entrepreneurial intentions: A TPB multi-group analysis at factor and indicator level



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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that diverse factors predict gender differences in entrepreneurial intent. Our paper integrates and expands on previous findings using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), including the deeper-level measurement model, allowing for a better understanding of the origin of differences. The results of a survey with business students indicate that the effect of gender on entrepreneurial intentions is mediated via personal attitudes and perceived behavioral control but not social norms. More precisely, vis-à-vis their male counterparts, women are more driven toward entrepreneurship by motives to 'get organized' (balance) that are less dominant in predicting personal attitude. Moreover, female students are somewhat less driven toward entrepreneurship by beliefs of internal control that are more dominant in predicting perceived control. Finally, while female students are also more motivated to comply with normative role models, this did not influence their entrepreneurial intentions over and above perceived behavioral control and personal attitude. We discuss both practical and theoretical implications of our findings.

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Introduction

Given the socio-economic benefits generally attributed to entrepreneurship (Carree & Thurik, 2006), academic, educational and governmental institutions are motivated to investigate the factors that influence entrepreneurial intentions. This pre-birth stage of firm gestation is well suited to gain understanding about drivers and inhibitors of entrepreneurship because it reflects preferences (preceding entrepreneurial activity) that can already deeply explain why certain individuals or groups display higher or lower entrepreneurial activity (Verheul, Thurik, Griolo, & van der Zwan, 2012). Notwithstanding previous policy efforts, international monitoring indicates that there still remains ample room to encourage entrepreneurship in the wider population and especially for certain under-represented groups. For example, international studies such as the "Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2011" (Kelley, Singer, & Herrington, 2012) demonstrate striking differences between men and women in entrepreneurial activity. In many high income countries, men are almost twice as likely to be early stage or established business owners. As an example, Belgium (the context of this study) has a ratio of four male to one female entrepreneur (Allen, Elam,

Langowitz, & Dean, 2008). Moreover, the so-called gender gap also persists beyond the actual entrepreneurial activity. As summarized by Mueller and Conway Dato-on (2013), research over the past decade has suggested the existence of the gender gap in entrepreneurial orientation and in the motivation, desire and intention to become an entrepreneur. The goal of the present study is to clarify the elements that account for gender differences in entrepreneurial intentions. Focusing on entrepreneurial intentions rather than on actual entrepreneurial behavior proves particularly valuable where the phenomenon of interest is difficult to tap into, involves time lags and is generally rare – a phenomenon just like entrepreneurship (Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000; MacMillan & Katz, 1992).

Previous literature has identified a diversity of elements that can contribute to gender differences in entrepreneurial intent. Some scholars have identified that women choose not to become entrepreneurs because it is an undesirable career option (Carter, Gartner, Shaver, & Gatewood, 2003; Clain, 2000; Cromie, 1987; Georgellis & Wall, 2005). Other scholars have identified that women choose not to become an entrepreneur because of a perceived lack of control or of self-efficacy (Barnir, Watson, & Hutchins, 2011; Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; Minniti & Nardone, 2007; Wilson, Kickul, & Marlino, 2007; Zhao, Seibert, & Hills, 2005). Finally, some authors posit that women choose not to become entrepreneurs because they perceive a lack of environmental support (Barnir et al., 2011; Hartman & Hartman, 2008; Hout & Rosen, 2000; Matthews & Moser, 1996). Rather than focusing on gender differences in isolated entrepreneurship

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drivers, Verheul, Thurik, and Grilo (2009) and Verheul et al. (2012) suggest that studying these different factors simultaneously in an overarching framework – the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) – can put the results of previous research into perspective. Research has demonstrated that the TPB can be used to effectively predict entrepreneurial intention (Krueger et al., 2000; Liñán & Chen, 2009; Van Gelderen et al., 2008; Yang, 2013). In this article we want to depart from the TPB framework to detect gender differences in the elements that explain entrepreneurial intention.

The TPB provides a very influential, powerful and popular conceptual frame to study human behavior (Ajzen, 2002; Armitage & Conner, 2001). This framework has not only been successfully applied to the study of entrepreneurial intentions, but also of entrepreneurial activity (Kolvereid & Isaksen, 2006; Souitaris, Zerbiniati & Al-Laham, 2007) or both (Verheul et al., 2012). Summarized, the TPB aims to explain intended behavior through three factors: the personal appraisal of the behavior in question (personal attitude), the perceived social pressure to (not) perform that behavior (social norms) and the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior (perceived behavioral control).

However, support for the importance of these three factors of the model has been inconsistent (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Liñán and Chen (2009) contend that these inconsistent findings may be related to differences in operational definitions. To anticipate this and other kinds of bias, Ajzen (2002) specified not only the structural part of the TPB model (focusing on the factor level) but also the deeper measurement part of the TPB model (the indicator level). As we shall explain further in the article, Ajzen (2002) specifies three categories of indicators that refer to people's beliefs or considerations: behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs. What is important to note at this point is that a relatively low number of previous studies on entrepreneurial intentions have consistently considered these indicators and that no previous studies have looked at gender differences herein. Investigating gender effects on the level of factors and indicators, though, could be very informative to find out why women comparatively have a lower preference for entrepreneurship than men. In fact, some of the measures of the factors may be gender-biased and that this bias may distort the comparison of the findings of factor-level models in literature.

Following the full theoretical TPB framework (Ajzen, 1991), including factors and indicators, this study aims to make two important contributions. First, in using TPB as our guiding theoretical framework (Ajzen, 1991), we contribute to literature that explains gender differences in entrepreneurial intentions with business students, an important target population to stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives. By integrating gender-related issues in an existing theoretical framework such as the TPB, we aim to gain a better understanding on how different factors contribute to differences in entrepreneurial intent (De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2007). Recent research has suggested that gender differences are more likely in the preference stage (intentions) than in the action stage (entrepreneurial activity) and that additional research on this topic remains necessary (Verheul et al., 2012). Second and related, by additionally incorporating the indicators proposed by the TPB, we seek to demonstrate that some of the findings in previous research on entrepreneurial intentions may be gender-biased in their measurement instruments (Ahl, 2006). This should provide us with clearer insights in the origin of gender differences in entrepreneurial intentions.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The TPB specifies the determinants of intentions to perform a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Turning to entrepreneurial

intentions, the TPB assumes that the strength of the intention to display entrepreneurial behavior depends on three so-called factors: (a) people's personal attitude, (b) subjective or social norms and (c) perceived behavioral control. Intention, in turn, along with perceived behavioral control determines actual behavior. *Personal attitude* is a subjective assessment of the consequences of one's intended behavior, which ultimately determines how much one likes or dislikes that behavior (Ajzen, 1991). *Social norms* stand for an individual's perception of the opinion that others who are important to him/her have on whether the individual should perform or avoid to perform a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1991). *Perceived behavioral control* captures the subjective assessment of one's ability and ease/difficulty to perform a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991). So all in all, entrepreneurial intentions depend on the personal desirability of entrepreneurship (personal attitude), the perceived social acceptability of entrepreneurship to a normative reference group (social norms) and the perceived feasibility of becoming an entrepreneur (perceived behavioral control). The latter, together with intentions, is theorized in the TPB to influence behavior, expressing that a person's intention can only lead to actual behavior if (s)he feels able to perform the behavior concerned (Ajzen, 1991). Perceived behavioral control therefore plays a dual role in the TPB model, shaping intentions and (once these intentions are formed) interacting with them to jointly affect behavior.

On top of this factor level, Ajzen (2002) further details an indicator level to model antecedents of intentions. He specifies three categories of indicators that refer to individuals' considerations or beliefs about the intended behavior: beliefs about the likely consequences or other attributes of the behavior (*behavioral beliefs*), beliefs about the normative expectations of important others (*normative beliefs*) and beliefs about the presence of elements that may further or hinder performance of the behavior (*control beliefs*). In their respective aggregates, these beliefs produce the factors (Ajzen, 2002): personal attitude, social norms and perceived behavioral control are a function of respectively behavioral, normative and control beliefs.

These indicators represent a fine-grained measurement of the different facets that the factor level taps into. For instance, an individual may see entrepreneurship as desirable (factor level) but can do so for different reasons: wealth versus autonomy (indicator level). Previous TPB inspired research on entrepreneurial intentions differs in whether it studies the factor level (e.g., Liñán & Chen, 2009), the indicator level (e.g., Kolvereid & Isaksen, 2006), or both (e.g., Krueger et al., 2000). In this paper, we hypothesize on the role of gender at both factor and indicator level. At the factor level, we hypothesize how the three factors of the TPB model mediate the impact of gender on entrepreneurial intentions. This mediation allows us to find out *how* and *why* gender affects entrepreneurial intentions through its antecedent factors (Edelman, Brush, & Manolova, 2005): does gender explain personal attitude, social norms and/or perceived behavioral control? This part of our model is similar to the TPB applied by Liñán and Chen (2009), apart from our specific hypotheses on gender. At the indicator level we hypothesize that gender moderates the strength of the relationship between certain indicators and their respective factors. The moderation enables us to detect *where* and *when* gender plays a role in shaping the factors (Edelman et al., 2005). Put differently, we aim to figure out here whether or not the linkage between the various beliefs and their corresponding factor is different for women and men. This could be very informative to trace the origins of differences between women and men in terms of entrepreneurial intentions. The relationships are summarized in Figs. 1 and 2 which depict our hypothesized research model (Fig. 1: factor level; Fig. 2: indicator level).

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