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## Understanding role models and gender influences on entrepreneurial intentions among college students

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### Abstract

Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the present study explores the effects of gender and role models on entrepreneurial intention. Data was collected by questionnaire from a sample of 331 Iranian college students. Consistent with the theory, results indicated that entrepreneurial role models indirectly influenced entrepreneurial intention through its antecedents in the TPB. The study found no gender differences in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention. However, gender affected the other relationships in the TPB, such that attitude towards entrepreneurship was a weaker, and subjective norm a stronger predictor of entrepreneurial intention for female students than for male.

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### 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as an important driver of economic growth, productivity, innovation, and job creation (OECD, 2011; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Due to this positive impact of entrepreneurship, many developing countries around the world, including Iran, have paid serious attention over the past decade to entrepreneurship as a potentially fundamental solution to various problems, these including a lack of economic improvement, increasing unemployment rates, an excessive number of college graduates, and the inability of the public and private sectors to provide work for graduating students. While entrepreneurship has been viewed as crucial to economic growth and development in developing countries, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the factors that influence individuals' intentions to start new businesses in these contexts (Karimi et al., 2010; 2013), in particular intentions of those who are still in the educational system. Therefore, it

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is crucial to understand what factors influence college students' entrepreneurial intention and behavior within sound theoretical frameworks in order to develop and implement effective educational strategies. In other words, understanding determinants of entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors can help entrepreneurial educators, consultants, advisors and policy makers to find the right way to foster entrepreneurship at universities and consequently in society.

Entrepreneurship researchers have adopted intentional models of social cognitions to study the key cognitive determinants of entrepreneurial intention and behavior (e.g., Krueger & Carsrud 1993; Kolvereid 1996). One well-researched social-cognitive model is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), originally presented by Ajzen (1988, 1991). The TPB postulates that intention is the most important determinant of behavior. Intention, in turn, is influenced by attitude (the degree to which the individual holds a positive or negative personal valuation about the behavior or its consequences), subjective norms (perceptions of pressure to engage in the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (PBC: the extent to which an individual believes they are capable of performing the behavior). In a meta-analytic review of 185 empirical studies that have applied the TPB, Armitage and Conner (2001) concluded that the TPB is efficacious in predicting both intentions and behaviors. With regard to entrepreneurship, the ability of the TPB to predict entrepreneurial intentions (EI) has been proven by number of studies in entrepreneurship (e.g. Kolvereid, 1996; Krueger et al., 2000; Autio et al., 2001; Linan & Chen, 2009). These studies suggest that attitude, subjective norms, and PBC typically explain 30%–50% of the variance in intentions. Therefore, about half of the variance remains unexplained in EI. Moreover, the relationships among the constructs are not consistent across different context and situations.

The exclusion of additional variables (through mediating effects) and moderating variables in the original TPB may account for both the limited explanatory power and the inconsistencies among studies (Conner et al., 2000). Several studies call for the inclusion of some additional and moderating factors (e.g., Linan et al., 2011). In mediating effects, exogenous or external variables will influence an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and subjective norms and those factors will ultimately predict intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Conner & Armitage, 1998). In moderating effects, external variables may have an effect on the relative importance of beliefs, attitudes, and subjective norms (Fishbein, 1980).

This study adds two important situational and sociocultural factors, i.e. entrepreneurial role models and gender, into the TPB model. Moreover, the focus of this research is on the context of developing countries: the study is carried out in Iran.

The OECD (2009) and the European Commission (2003) identify the presence of entrepreneurial role models as amongst the most important for entrepreneurship. Gibson (2004), based on the theories of social learning and role identification, argues that role models serve three interrelated functions: "to provide learning, to provide motivation and inspiration and to help individuals define their self-concept". Nauta and Kokaly (2001) add another function to role models: to provide support and guidance. Therefore, entrepreneurial role models can be seen as a possible source for entrepreneurship learning and inspiring students to become successful entrepreneurs in business. Despite its importance in students' entrepreneurial career choices and entrepreneurship education, debate on the magnitude of this influence continues. Therefore, the purpose of adding entrepreneurial role models to the TPB as an exogenous variable is to examine whether this additional variable could enhance the predictive ability of the original TPB model.

Gender difference is another fundamental sociocultural dimension that influences entrepreneurship. Despite the increasing the number and share of women entrepreneurs (De Bruin et al., 2006; Brush, 2006), entrepreneurship is still a male-stereotyped domain and associated with masculine traits (Ahl, 2006; Lewis, 2006) and women's entrepreneurship is still significantly lower than male (Blanchflower, 2004; Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; Marlow, 2002). This gap is also very wide in Iran. Women constitute less than 10% of entrepreneurs in Iran which is lower than both regional (Middle East and North Africa: MENA) and global average level (Sarfaraz & Faghieh, 2011). Only 13% of 5169 firms surveyed by the World Bank in MENA are owned by women. According to the World Bank, globally 25% to 33% of all private businesses are owned or operated by women.

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