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Determinants of Entrepreneurial Intention among University Students in Guizhou, China: The Mediating Role of Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy and the Moderating Role of Networking

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ABSTRACT: Entrepreneurship has become an increasingly important component of higher education as governments and universities seek to improve graduate employability, innovation and regional economic development. This issue is especially relevant in China, where the expansion of higher education has intensified competition for graduate employment and strengthened policy support for entrepreneurship as an alternative career pathway. Nevertheless, entrepreneurial intention is not determined by policy exposure or entrepreneurship education alone. This conceptual article develops an integrated framework to explain entrepreneurial intention among university students in Guizhou Province, an inland region with distinctive economic, employment and entrepreneurial conditions. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Cognitive Theory, the framework integrates attitude toward behaviour, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and proactive personality as antecedents of entrepreneurial intention. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy is positioned as both a direct predictor and a mediating mechanism through which these antecedents influence entrepreneurial intention, while networking is proposed as a boundary condition that strengthens the translation of entrepreneurial confidence into intention. The framework extends conventional intention models by combining behavioural cognition, personality, efficacy beliefs and social-resource access. It also provides a context-sensitive explanation of entrepreneurial career formation among students in Guizhou. The article concludes with theoretical implications, practical recommendations for universities and policymakers, and directions for empirical testing using structural equation modelling.

KEYWORDS: entrepreneurial intention; entrepreneurial self-efficacy; attitude toward behaviour; subjective norms; perceived behavioural control; proactive personality; networking; university students; Guizhou; China

I. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship contributes to innovation, employment creation and economic restructuring, while universities increasingly face expectations to prepare graduates not only for salaried employment but also for opportunity recognition, venture creation and self-employment. Consequently, entrepreneurial intention has become a central topic in entrepreneurship and higher-education research.

The issue is particularly salient in China. Rapid growth in higher education has increased the number of graduates entering the labour market, intensifying competition for conventional jobs. In response, entrepreneurship and innovation have become important elements of national and university development agendas. Universities now provide entrepreneurship courses, competitions, incubation programmes, mentoring, practical training and university–industry collaboration. Yet participation in such initiatives does not necessarily lead students to choose entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is a planned behaviour involving uncertainty, resources, risk and personal agency. Understanding why some students develop entrepreneurial intention therefore requires attention to the psychological and social mechanisms underlying career choice. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) explains intention through attitude toward behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control [1]. However, entrepreneurship also requires initiative, persistence and confidence. Proactive personality and entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) may therefore provide additional explanatory power.

This article develops an integrated conceptual model for university students in Guizhou. It proposes that attitude, subjective norms,

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perceived behavioural control and proactive personality influence entrepreneurial intention directly and indirectly through ESE. Networking is further proposed to moderate the ESE–intention relationship. The framework thus links behavioural evaluation, personality, capability beliefs and social resources in a single model.

II. RESEARCH CONTEXT: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN GUIZHOU, CHINA

China's economic transformation has positioned entrepreneurship and innovation as important mechanisms for employment creation and development. At the same time, the expansion of higher education has increased the supply of educated labour. Entrepreneurship has therefore become an additional pathway through which graduates may create employment for themselves and others.

Guizhou Province offers a particularly meaningful context for studying entrepreneurial intention. Located in southwest China, Guizhou differs from historically more developed coastal regions in market maturity, industrial concentration, employment opportunities, resource availability and access to entrepreneurial networks. These differences matter because entrepreneurial intention is formed within a specific economic and social environment rather than in isolation.

Economic transformation also creates new opportunities. Digital services, tourism, cultural industries, agriculture, rural revitalisation, e-commerce and emerging industries can provide entrepreneurial possibilities for graduates. Universities may help students identify these opportunities through entrepreneurship education, innovation competitions, incubation centres, mentoring and industry engagement.

Nevertheless, Guizhou students may face constraints that reduce the attractiveness or perceived feasibility of entrepreneurship. Limited business experience, insufficient financial resources, weak professional networks, uncertainty about market opportunities and family preferences for stable employment can discourage venture creation. The availability of entrepreneurship programmes therefore does not guarantee that students will perceive entrepreneurship as desirable and achievable.

Four antecedents are especially relevant. Attitude toward entrepreneurship reflects whether students consider venture creation rewarding and worthwhile. Subjective norms capture the influence of parents, peers, teachers and other significant reference groups. Perceived behavioural control reflects whether entrepreneurship appears manageable and feasible. Proactive personality represents the tendency to identify opportunities, initiate action and persist in changing circumstances.

These antecedents may still be insufficient if students lack confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities. A student can value entrepreneurship but doubt his or her ability to identify customers, obtain resources, develop products or manage a venture. ESE may therefore convert favourable perceptions and personal tendencies into stronger intention. Networking may provide an additional enabling condition by connecting students with lecturers, alumni, entrepreneurs, incubators, government agencies, industry practitioners and potential investors. Such connections can provide information, advice, legitimacy, emotional support and access to resources.

A Guizhou-focused model consequently contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of entrepreneurship in China and avoids assuming that findings from advanced coastal cities automatically apply to inland provinces.

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior provides the principal foundation for the proposed framework. TPB argues that behaviour is preceded by behavioural intention, which reflects an individual's motivation and willingness to perform a particular action. Intention is shaped by attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control [1].

Attitude refers to a favourable or unfavourable evaluation of performing a behaviour. In entrepreneurship, it concerns whether establishing a business is perceived as desirable, rewarding or worthwhile. Subjective norms concern perceived approval or social pressure from important people or groups. Perceived behavioural control concerns the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour and the extent to which the individual believes that the necessary resources and capabilities are available.

Entrepreneurship is particularly suitable for intention-based analysis because venture creation is generally deliberate rather than spontaneous. Individuals usually evaluate desirability and feasibility before committing time, effort and resources. Previous entrepreneurial-intention research has established the usefulness of TPB and related intention models [8], [9]. The

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present framework retains the three TPB antecedents but extends the model by incorporating proactive personality and ESE.

Social Cognitive Theory and Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy

Social Cognitive Theory emphasises reciprocal interactions among cognition, behaviour and environmental influences [3], [4]. A central construct is self-efficacy: an individual's belief in his or her capability to organise and perform actions required to achieve desired outcomes. Self-efficacy influences goal selection, effort, persistence, resilience and responses to difficulty.

These processes are highly relevant to entrepreneurship, which requires problem solving, decision making, opportunity exploitation, resource mobilisation and persistence under uncertainty. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy applies efficacy beliefs specifically to entrepreneurial tasks. Chen et al. [6] conceptualised ESE as confidence in the ability to perform entrepreneurial roles and tasks, while Zhao et al. [13] demonstrated its importance as a mediator in the development of entrepreneurial intention.

In the proposed model, ESE is therefore not treated merely as another independent variable. It is positioned as a central psychological mechanism through which attitudes, social influence, perceived control and proactive tendencies may be transformed into entrepreneurial intention.

Proactive Personality Perspective

Proactive personality refers to a relatively stable tendency to identify opportunities, take initiative, challenge constraints and persist until meaningful change occurs [5]. Entrepreneurship is inherently proactive because entrepreneurs do not merely adapt to existing structures; they attempt to create new economic activities. Crant [7] showed that proactive personality predicts entrepreneurial intention. Including proactivity therefore recognises that entrepreneurial intention reflects not only evaluations of a career option but also enduring differences in individuals' tendency to act upon their environment.

IV. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND DIRECT HYPOTHESES

Attitude toward Behaviour

Students who associate entrepreneurship with autonomy, achievement, personal development, financial opportunity, innovation or career satisfaction should be more willing to consider starting a business. Within TPB, attitude is among the most proximal determinants of intention. Entrepreneurship research likewise shows that favourable entrepreneurial attitudes are associated with stronger entrepreneurial intention [8], [9].

H1: Attitude toward behaviour positively affects entrepreneurial intention.

Positive attitudes may also strengthen ESE. Students who value entrepreneurship are more likely to seek entrepreneurial information, participate in training and competitions, observe role models and acquire relevant skills. Such engagement can increase familiarity with entrepreneurial tasks and strengthen perceived competence.

H2: Attitude toward behaviour positively affects entrepreneurial self-efficacy.

Subjective Norms

Subjective norms reflect perceived approval from important reference groups such as parents, relatives, friends, classmates, lecturers and mentors. Students rarely make career decisions in complete social isolation. Supportive families can provide encouragement, legitimacy, tolerance of risk and sometimes financial assistance, while supportive lecturers and peers can normalise entrepreneurship as a legitimate career choice.

H3: Subjective norms positively affect entrepreneurial intention.

Social influence may also affect whether students believe themselves capable of becoming entrepreneurs. Encouragement from parents, peers, lecturers, mentors and entrepreneurial role models can operate through verbal persuasion and vicarious learning, both recognised sources of self-efficacy [4].

H4: Subjective norms positively affect entrepreneurial self-efficacy.

Perceived Behavioural Control

Perceived behavioural control reflects the degree to which entrepreneurship is considered within the individual's control. Students with stronger perceived control should be more likely to believe that they can overcome barriers, obtain resources and perform entrepreneurial activities. This is especially important because entrepreneurship requires knowledge, skills, capital, information, opportunity recognition and persistence.

H5: Perceived behavioural control positively affects entrepreneurial intention.

Perceived behavioural control and ESE are related but distinct. The former concerns broader perceptions of feasibility and controllability, whereas ESE focuses on confidence in performing entrepreneurial tasks. Greater access to resources,

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knowledge and decision-making autonomy can strengthen both perceptions.

H6: Perceived behavioural control positively affects entrepreneurial self-efficacy.

Proactive Personality

Proactive individuals identify opportunities, initiate actions and attempt to alter their environment rather than merely adapting to circumstances. These tendencies correspond closely with entrepreneurship. Students high in proactivity may be more willing to identify unmet needs, consider self-employment, participate in entrepreneurship programmes and convert ideas into possible business opportunities.

H7: Proactive personality positively affects entrepreneurial intention.

Proactivity should also strengthen ESE. Individuals who repeatedly take initiative accumulate mastery experiences involving problem solving, goal pursuit and overcoming obstacles. Proactive students may participate more actively in competitions, internships, networking and project development, thereby developing knowledge and receiving feedback regarding their abilities.

H8: Proactive personality positively affects entrepreneurial self-efficacy.

Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy

ESE represents confidence in one's ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks. Students who believe they can identify opportunities, develop products, mobilise resources, manage uncertainty and operate a venture should perceive entrepreneurship as more achievable. This belief may be particularly important among university students because most have limited experience in establishing or managing businesses and must therefore rely heavily on perceived competence when evaluating entrepreneurship.

Chen et al. [6] identified ESE as an important entrepreneurship-related construct, and Zhao et al. [13] demonstrated its role in developing entrepreneurial intention. Strong efficacy beliefs can reduce perceived uncertainty, increase persistence and make entrepreneurial goals appear attainable.

H9: Entrepreneurial self-efficacy positively affects entrepreneurial intention.

V. MEDIATING ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL SELF-EFFICACY

The framework proposes that ESE explains how antecedent characteristics are translated into entrepreneurial intention. This argument follows Social Cognitive Theory, according to which experiences, social signals and personal characteristics affect behaviour partly through efficacy beliefs. The mediating perspective distinguishes between perceiving entrepreneurship positively and believing oneself capable of performing it.

Attitude → ESE → Entrepreneurial Intention

A favourable attitude may motivate students to acquire entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, participate in practical activities and seek entrepreneurial experiences. These activities can strengthen ESE, which subsequently increases entrepreneurial intention. Thus, positive evaluation is more likely to become a career intention when it is accompanied by confidence in entrepreneurial capability.

H10a: Entrepreneurial self-efficacy mediates the relationship between attitude toward behaviour and entrepreneurial intention.

Subjective Norms → ESE → Entrepreneurial Intention

Support from significant others may influence entrepreneurial intention partly by increasing students' confidence. Parents, friends, teachers, mentors and entrepreneurial role models can provide encouragement, information, feedback and validation. Such support can operate through verbal persuasion and vicarious experience, strengthening efficacy beliefs. Social approval may therefore signal not only that entrepreneurship is acceptable but also that it is achievable.

H10b: Entrepreneurial self-efficacy mediates the relationship between subjective norms and entrepreneurial intention.

Perceived Behavioural Control → ESE → Entrepreneurial Intention

Students who perceive entrepreneurial activity as within their control are likely to develop stronger confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities. Perceived access to resources, knowledge, opportunities and decision-making capacity can reduce barriers and strengthen task-specific efficacy. ESE may consequently explain part of the process through which perceived behavioural control produces entrepreneurial intention.

H10c: Entrepreneurial self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention.

Proactive Personality → ESE → Entrepreneurial Intention

Proactive students frequently seek opportunities, initiate activities and persist when obstacles arise.

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These behaviours generate mastery experiences that can enhance confidence in entrepreneurial capability. Proactivity may therefore influence entrepreneurial intention not only because proactive individuals prefer action, but also because their experiences strengthen the belief that they can perform entrepreneurial tasks.

H10d: Entrepreneurial self-efficacy mediates the relationship between proactive personality and entrepreneurial intention.

VI. MODERATING ROLE OF NETWORKING

Networking refers to developing and maintaining relationships through which individuals gain access to information, advice, opportunities, knowledge, resources and support. Entrepreneurship is embedded in social relationships because individuals rarely possess all resources required for venture creation independently. For students, this issue is especially important because they typically have limited business experience, professional knowledge, financial capital and market access.

Student networks may include classmates, lecturers, alumni, entrepreneurs, family members, incubators, government agencies, industry practitioners, investors and entrepreneurship-support organisations. Such relationships can provide market information, mentors, partners, customers, suppliers, financing information and emotional support.

The framework proposes that networking strengthens the relationship between ESE and entrepreneurial intention. High ESE indicates confidence in entrepreneurial capability, but confidence may be insufficient when access to external resources is perceived as weak. Strong networks can make entrepreneurial capability more actionable because students recognise that resource gaps can be supplemented through social relationships.

Conversely, students with high ESE may still hesitate when they lack useful contacts. This boundary condition may be particularly relevant in Guizhou, where access to entrepreneurial ecosystems can vary across universities, disciplines, family backgrounds and locations.

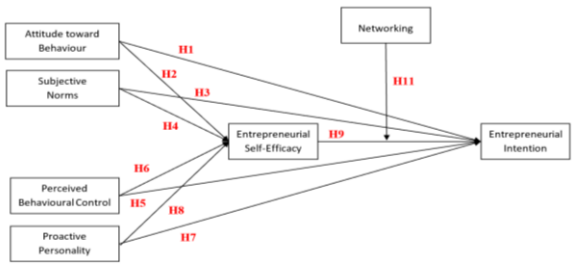
H11: Networking moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention, such that the positive relationship is stronger when networking is higher.

VII. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework integrates TPB, Social Cognitive Theory and proactive personality perspectives. Attitude toward behaviour, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and proactive personality are specified as antecedents of both ESE and entrepreneurial intention. ESE predicts entrepreneurial intention and mediates each of the four antecedent relationships, while networking moderates the ESE–intention relationship.

The model contains three explanatory levels. The first consists of behavioural evaluations, social influence, perceived control and individual predisposition. The second concerns capability beliefs represented by ESE. The third concerns the social-resource environment represented by networking. This layered structure reflects the argument that entrepreneurial intention is unlikely to arise from a single determinant.

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual relationships among the study constructs.



H10a: Attitude toward behaviour → entrepreneurial self-efficacy → entrepreneurial intention
H10b: Subjective norms → entrepreneurial self-efficacy → entrepreneurial intention
H10c: Perceived behavioural control → entrepreneurial self-efficacy → entrepreneurial intention
H10d: Proactive personality → entrepreneurial self-efficacy → entrepreneurial intention

VIII. DISCUSSION

The proposed framework advances entrepreneurial-intention research by moving beyond a simple direct-effects model. Conventional studies often test whether attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control predict intention. Although theoretically useful, such models provide less explanation of the psychological process through which favourable evaluations and social conditions become entrepreneurial career intentions.

ESE addresses this limitation. A student may view entrepreneurship positively but still lack confidence in the ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks. Social support may legitimise entrepreneurship but may have limited impact unless the student internalises that support as confidence. Perceived control may strengthen intention partly because it increases task-specific efficacy, while proactive behaviour may create

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mastery experiences that strengthen entrepreneurial confidence.

The model therefore distinguishes between wanting entrepreneurship and believing oneself capable of entrepreneurship. This distinction has practical importance because universities may successfully increase awareness and interest while still producing weak entrepreneurial intention if students do not develop confidence in opportunity identification, market research, financing, business-model development and venture management.

Networking adds an external-resource dimension. ESE is primarily an internal psychological resource, whereas networking provides access to resources located in the social environment. The proposed moderation reflects the interaction between personal capability beliefs and the perceived availability of external assistance.

IX. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

First, the framework extends TPB by incorporating proactive personality. TPB emphasises behavioural beliefs, social influence and perceived control, whereas proactive personality adds a dispositional perspective. This recognises that students differ in their tendency to initiate change and act upon opportunities even when they face similar external conditions.

Second, ESE is positioned as a central explanatory mechanism rather than simply another predictor. Building on Social Cognitive Theory and prior entrepreneurship research, the model proposes that ESE simultaneously mediates the effects of attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and proactive personality. This offers a more integrated explanation of how cognitive and personality antecedents become entrepreneurial intention.

Third, the framework distinguishes perceived behavioural control from ESE. Although conceptually related, the constructs are not treated as interchangeable. Perceived behavioural control concerns broader perceptions of feasibility and control, whereas ESE concerns confidence in performing specific entrepreneurial tasks. The model therefore allows empirical examination of whether general control perceptions influence intention through more task-specific capability beliefs.

Fourth, networking introduces a contextual boundary condition. Psychological confidence may not translate equally into intention under all social-resource conditions. By proposing that networking strengthens the ESE–intention relationship, the model explicitly recognises that entrepreneurial cognition is embedded within social relationships.

Finally, the study provides regional contextualisation. China is economically and socially heterogeneous. Examining university students in Guizhou can complement evidence from more developed regions and contribute to understanding whether established entrepreneurial-intention relationships operate similarly in inland provinces.

X. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Universities should move beyond entrepreneurship-awareness activities that focus mainly on communicating the benefits of entrepreneurship. Positive attitudes matter, but students also need opportunities to develop ESE. Experiential learning through simulations, business projects, competitions, internships, mentoring, opportunity-identification exercises and interaction with entrepreneurs can provide mastery and vicarious experiences that strengthen confidence.

Entrepreneurship education should also develop specific competencies. Students may favour entrepreneurship while remaining uncertain about market research, financing, business models, negotiation, stakeholder management and venture operations. Skill-focused training can make entrepreneurship appear more feasible and strengthen both perceived behavioural control and ESE.

Universities should recognise the influence of subjective norms. Alumni, local entrepreneurs and families can help establish entrepreneurship as a legitimate graduate career. At the same time, programmes should cultivate proactive behaviour by encouraging students to identify problems, propose solutions, develop prototypes, contact customers and initiate real projects rather than relying exclusively on classroom instruction.

Networking should be deliberately embedded within entrepreneurship support. University entrepreneurship centres can connect students with alumni entrepreneurs, local firms, industry associations, incubators, investors, government agencies and experienced mentors. Effective networking should extend beyond ceremonial events toward continuing mentorship, internships, project collaboration and venture-development relationships.

For policymakers in Guizhou, the framework suggests that financial incentives alone may be insufficient. Entrepreneurial support systems should strengthen capability, confidence and social connectivity simultaneously. Cross-

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university entrepreneurial networks, mentorship databases, student incubation platforms, entrepreneurial communities and university–industry collaboration can help students access resources that are not available through their families or immediate social circles.

Such institutional networking may be particularly important for students from backgrounds with limited entrepreneurial resources. By widening access to mentors, entrepreneurs, partners and support agencies, universities can reduce inequalities in students' ability to convert entrepreneurial confidence into realistic career intentions.

XI. DIRECTIONS FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The proposed model should be tested empirically among university students in Guizhou using validated multi-item instruments. Entrepreneurial intention and the TPB constructs may be adapted from established entrepreneurial-intention measures such as Liñán and Chen (2009). ESE measures can draw on Chen et al. [6] and subsequent entrepreneurship research, while proactive personality can be measured using established scales originating from Bateman and Crant (1993). Networking measures should specifically capture students' ability to develop and use relationships relevant to entrepreneurial information, opportunities, resources and support.

Sampling students from several Guizhou universities would improve heterogeneity in disciplines, institutional environments and student backgrounds. Students exposed to entrepreneurship education constitute a particularly relevant population because they possess at least some familiarity with entrepreneurial concepts and activities.

Structural equation modelling is suitable because the framework contains multiple latent constructs, direct relationships, mediation and moderation. Partial least squares structural equation modelling may be useful where the research objective emphasises prediction and explanation. The measurement model should assess indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity. The structural model should assess collinearity, path coefficients, explanatory power, effect sizes, predictive relevance and statistical significance.

Bootstrapping can test the indirect effects in H10a–H10d, while the moderating effect in H11 can be assessed through an interaction term between ESE and networking. Where moderation is significant, simple-slope analysis can illustrate how the ESE–intention relationship varies across networking levels. Future longitudinal research should also examine whether entrepreneurial intention develops into nascent entrepreneurial activity and actual venture creation after graduation.

XII. CONCLUSION

Entrepreneurial intention among university students reflects the interaction of behavioural evaluations, social influence, personality, capability beliefs and social resources. In Guizhou, these mechanisms are especially important because entrepreneurship may contribute simultaneously to graduate career development and regional economic transformation.

The proposed framework argues that attitude toward behaviour, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and proactive personality influence entrepreneurial intention both directly and through ESE. ESE occupies a central position because favourable entrepreneurial cognition is more likely to produce intention when students believe they possess the capabilities required for entrepreneurship. Networking provides an additional contextual condition by increasing the extent to which confidence can be translated into a realistic entrepreneurial career intention.

The central implication is that encouraging entrepreneurship requires more than persuading students that venture creation is desirable. Students must also perceive entrepreneurship as feasible, develop confidence and proactive tendencies, and gain access to networks that support entrepreneurial action. Empirical examination of the model can clarify how students progress from entrepreneurial awareness to confidence and ultimately to intention.

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