



Article

Exploring the Entrepreneurial Intention of Female Students in Italy

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the entrepreneurial intention of Italian female students according to the Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). In particular, we analysed the women's intention to become entrepreneurs because the relevance of the female entrepreneurship phenomenon is a growing issue. Indeed, millions of women are involved in creating and operating enterprises, which suggests that women are an important engine of economic growth for developing countries. Using survey data from 441 Italian female students, we found that social pressure influences business students' intention to become entrepreneurs. Focusing on female students, their intention is affected also by the perceived behavioural control. These results are of interest for policy makers and regulators in promoting entrepreneurial skills among young populations, with consequent reduction of the unemployment rate. Finally, this paper provides a new model that helps to understand the students' entrepreneurial intentions based on gender role.

Keywords: gender; Theory of Planned Behaviour; entrepreneurial intention

1. Introduction

The creation of new enterprises is at the basis of economic and social development [1,2]. Indeed, many countries have focused their economic and social growth on the entrepreneurship [3–10]. In particular, the positive effect of young entrepreneurship has a beneficial impact on the economics and political aspects of a country [11]. Many studies have investigated several potential factors, such as intentions, motivations, previous experiences, education, attitudes, personal traits and social contexts that may influence entrepreneurial initiatives [12–23]. Generally, the results of these studies appear mixed because some of them argue that young people do not have sufficient labour market experience or the ability to sustain entrepreneurial decisions, which affects their entrepreneurial intention. Other studies claim that young student entrepreneurs have more innovation and technology skills as well as flexibility, which positively affects their perceived behavioural control and, consequently, their entrepreneurial intentions [24–26].

This study analysed the entrepreneurial intentions of female university students because they have enormous potential for becoming entrepreneurs [27–32]. The positioning of this paper, with respect to the topic of female entrepreneurship, resumes Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which states that the intention to become an entrepreneur depends on some logical constructs. The contribution of this paper to the TPB is, on the one hand, to confirm Ajzen's theory of entrepreneurial intentions, and, on the other hand, to focus on the topic of gender issue in the Italian context.

In addition, recent research results favour a new "open role" of universities to fulfil their functions as knowledge providers [33]. Thus, we adopted Ajzen's TPB [34–36] because it represents the most commonly used theory in this type of study that investigates people's entrepreneurial intentions, motivations and actions [37–42]. According to this theory, we focus on three traditional

logical constructs: the attitude towards the behaviour, social norms and perceived behavioural control [37,41] that affect the final intention. Furthermore, this study analysed survey data from a sample of Italian female students concerning their entrepreneurship intentions. More precisely, we submitted a questionnaire and adopted an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model to test our research hypothesis.

Female entrepreneurship has an important role in the economic growth for developing countries, and its development improves productive work, achieves gender equality and reduces poverty; thus, the analysis of entrepreneurial intention can be useful for developing successful entrepreneurship-related policies and for understanding a country's competitiveness and growth potential [42–45]. Overall, our findings document that social pressure has a higher significant impact on female students' intention to become entrepreneurs. This paper, therefore, contributes to the academic and policy debate about students' entrepreneurial intentions, particularly focusing on women due to stereotypes and roles that are attributed to them according to their gender.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section introduces the literature review and hypotheses. We then describe the research design. The subsequent section illustrates the results. Finally, we provide the discussion of our findings and their implications.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1. Studies on Ajzen's TPB

According to Ajzen [34], the interpretation of a behaviour is the set of the attitude towards it (i.e., behavioural beliefs or perceived desirability), subjective norms (i.e., normative beliefs or perceived feasibility) and perceived behavioural control (i.e., control beliefs or self-efficacy). The attitude towards a certain behaviour is the degree to which an individual assesses a certain behaviour or action to be beneficial and useful; thus, it indicates the personal favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the intention to become an entrepreneur [46]. The social norm is the social pressure that considers people's opinions of the proposed behaviour. It depends on the expectation of aid from other important people, such as parents in the case of young entrepreneurs [17,40,47,48]. The perceived behavioural control represents the propensity to act and the perceived feasibility of exhibiting a particular behaviour. It is the individual's perception of situational capabilities (i.e., self-efficacy) [47]. In our case, this predictor refers to students' perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the entrepreneurial behaviour, and it is assumed to reflect past experiences as well as anticipated impediments and obstacles [49,50].

Ajzen clarified that the exact nature of these relationships remains uncertain [34] and is still an empirical issue, as there is a general adherence to the particular context of reference [17]. In this study, we focused on the prediction of entrepreneurial intentions rather than on its realisation because the increasing flexibility of jobs has led to increasing uncertainty of permanent work. Hence, given that the excess of flexibility has brought context to an excess of uncertainty, people prefer the entrepreneurial way to avoid unemployment concerns [11,51].

2.2. Studies on Women Entrepreneurial Intentions

Women would also like to try the way of entrepreneurship. Indeed, the number of "pink" businesses increased in the last years [52–60]. However, many studies have found that males have a higher preference for entrepreneurship behaviour than females [28,61]. This preference is not due to a greater capacity of one compared to the other but rather to the difficulties that women often meet, for example, in obtaining a bank loan because women are perceived as less creditable than men [60–62].

Different studies, however, analyse the determinants of entrepreneurial intention according to the gender of people interviewed, but final results are still mixed. Kolvereid (1996) found that males have a significantly higher preference for self-employment than females. The author concluded that gender influences self-employment intentions indirectly through their effect on attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control. Similarly, Veciana et al. [62] investigated the attitude, social norms and

perceived behavioural control for entrepreneurship according to students' gender in Spain and Puerto Rico and concluded that, although the female students interviewed had a favourable perception of the attitude towards entrepreneurship, their perceived social pressures were not positive and their intentions were relatively low.

It might seem obvious that women could have a high entrepreneurial intention because governments often develop policies and special programs addressed to them to encourage innovation and business development; however, despite these facilities, women often find barriers in their entrepreneurial activity. Indeed, Davidsson (2003) investigated the determinants of entrepreneurial intention based on Swedish participants and concluded that gender has little or no direct influence on entrepreneurial intentions.

In contrast to the aforementioned studies, Hackett et al. [63] found that gender differences are mediated by changes in self-efficacy. This was confirmed by Krueger et al. [26] who stated that the role of gender enhances our understanding of entrepreneurial intention. Similarly, Wang and Wong explained entrepreneurial interest of students in Singapore based on personal background. The study reveals that gender, family business experience and education level are significant factors in explaining entrepreneurial interest.

According to the above literature and considering the mixed findings, we developed the following set of research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Attitude toward entrepreneurship has a positive effect on entrepreneurial intention of Italian female students.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Subjective norm, regarding entrepreneurship, has a positive effect on the entrepreneurial intention of Italian female students.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Perceived behavioural control has a positive effect on the entrepreneurial intention of Italian female students.*

3. Research Design

Method and Variables Description

We collected survey data of a sample of 441 Italian female students that is representative only for the population surveyed. More specifically, the questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was related to personal data (i.e., socio-demographic variables, such as age, level of educational (graduate or undergraduate), the field of university studies and previous work experience), while the second part included questions concerning attitude (ATT), subjective norm (SN), perceived behavioural control (PBC) and intentions (INT).

In line with prior studies [37,50,51], we developed a four-point Likert-based questionnaire (ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 4, strongly agree). This kind of scale avoids the central tendency bias (i.e., the likelihood of choosing the midpoint) because it adopts a scale of even numbers (Si and Cullen [64]). In the preliminary stage of the study, the questionnaire was pre-tested on 100 students, in the period between 25 March and 30 March 2017, to validate the scale in the questionnaire [20]. The students who participated in the questionnaire's pre-test phase were not included in the final sample.

To ensure consistency of the scale, we carried out an explanatory factor principal component analysis (PCA). This procedure is used to suppress indicators with a correlation lower than 0.3; thus, we eliminated three factors of ATT towards performing the behaviour, three of SN and two of PBC. Our tests showed alpha values of 0.824 for ATT, 0.853 for SN and 0.911 for PBC.

The questionnaire, submitted in April 2017, allowed us to code 21 response variables concerning the aforementioned personal data and four logical constructs: (1) PBC; (2) ATT; (3) SN; and (4) INT. In particular, PBC was captured by questions concerning students' perception of the ease or difficulty of

performing the entrepreneurial behaviour through sentences: “Creating a new business will be easy for me”; “Developing an entrepreneurial project will be easy for me”; and “Controlling the creation process of a new firm will be easy for me”. ATT was captured by questions concerning students’ emotional attitude to create their own business, such as if the skills (i.e., communication skills, intercultural skills, thinking skills, etc.) acquired at a university are useful to become an entrepreneur. Questions related to SN regarded opinions of external parties. In other words, the approval of your business choice by the people you consider important in your life (i.e., parents, relatives, partners, etc.).

Lastly, with regard to INT, questions were related to the personal opinion to become an entrepreneur over the following years: “Are you ready to do anything to be an entrepreneur?”; “Are you ready to make economic and personal sacrifices to become an entrepreneur?”; and “Are you ready to take a greater risk than you have considered due to some business choices?”. The variables observed are categorised as follows:

- ATT is the mean score of all the answers concerning the attitude towards performing the behaviour.
- INT is the mean score of all the answers concerning the intention to become entrepreneur.
- SN is the mean score of all the answers concerning the perceived social pressure.
- PBC is the mean score of all the answers concerning the self-efficacy.
- DEGREE indicates if the respondent attends a three-year bachelor course (codified as 1-2-3) or a two-year master of science (codified as 4-5). Indeed, the aim of this variable was to verify the impact of cultural degree on the entrepreneurial intentions. In other words, we analysed whether the participation in a bachelor course, rather than a master of science, influenced the final intention.
- STUDIES indicates the type of university studies. We codified students who attend a business study as 1; otherwise, we codified the variable as 0. Students who follow a university course in business and management have a greater propensity to become entrepreneurs, thanks to the skills acquired during ad hoc university programmes.
- WORK_EXP indicates if students have had a previous work experience that could have an impact on the entrepreneurial intention. This variable is codified as 1 if the student has developed a previous work experience; otherwise, the variable is codified as 0.

According to these variables, we performed the following OLS model:

$$\text{INT} = \alpha + \beta_1\text{ATT} + \beta_2\text{SN} + \beta_3\text{PBC} + \beta_4\text{DEGREE} + \beta_5\text{STUDIES} + \beta_6\text{WORK_EXP} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

4. Results

We performed OLS analysis to verify the association between variables. Before implementing the model, we tested the assumptions of the model: normality of dependent variable (Shapiro–Wilk test); homoskedasticity (Breusch–Pagan test); and absence of autocorrelation between residuals (Durbin–Watson test) (all tests are not tabled). The aforementioned tests are statistically significant, so our data respect the base assumption of OLS.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each construct that is composed by a defined number of questions. Our sample shows a standard deviation of the total sample, which is less than one [1] for each variable, suggesting that students agree on the answers. In addition, it is possible to observe that the variable ATT has a mean of 3.34, suggesting that they have quite high perceived desirability. The SN has a mean of 2.97, while PBC has a mean of 3.16 [31]. The results for the intention document that Italian female business students are not oriented to become entrepreneurs (mean = 1.79). We can have more details only with the inferential statistics.

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation among variables. Specifically, the variables ATT, PBC, SN and INT are positively correlated (p -value < 0.01). In addition, ATT is positively correlated with

WORK_EXP (p -value < 0.10), while it is negatively correlated with STUDIES (p -value < 0.10). Moreover, PBC and INT are positively correlated with STUDIES (respectively, p -value < 0.01 and p -value < 0.05).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Constructs	Mean	Median	dev.st.
ATT	3.34	3.30	0.34
SN	2.97	3.00	0.59
PBC	3.16	3.27	0.72
INT	1.79	1.75	0.44
DEGREE	3.22	3.00	1.08
STUDIES	0.67	1.00	0.47
WORK_EXP	0.45	0.00	0.50

Table 2. Pearson correlation.

	ATT	PBC	INT	SN	DEGREE	STUDIES	WORK_EXP
ATT	1						
PBC	0.16 ***	1					
INT	0.13 ***	0.11 ***	1				
SN	0.12 ***	0.11 ***	0.51 ***	1			
DEGREE	−0.00	0.01	0.06	0.02	1		
STUDIES	−0.09 *	0.19 ***	0.11 **	0.05	0.01	1	
WORK_EXP	0.08 *	0.06	0.06	0.01	0.09	−0.09	1

*: p -value < 0.10%; **: p -value < 0.05%; ***: p -value < 0.01%.

Table 3 shows the OLS analysis. We can see that the sample has no problem of multicollinearity; indeed, VIF and Tolerance tests show normal values. ATT is statistically significant (p -value < 0.10), so we can accept the H1 hypothesis. This means that the perceived desirability of entrepreneurial behaviour affects female students’ intention to become entrepreneurs. The SN is the stronger predictor (p -value < 0.01), so H2 hypothesis is accepted. With regard to the control variables, only STUDIES is statistically significant (p -value < 0.10). Lastly, PBC is statistically significant (p -value < 0.05), indicating that H3 hypothesis is accepted.

Table 3. Regression results.

Model	Beta	Std. Error	VIF (Tolerance)	Student t
Constant	0.94	0.25		3.75 ***
ATT	0.11	0.05	1.02 (0.97)	1.67 *
PBC	0.07	0.03	1.02 (0.97)	2.67 **
SN	0.48	0.03	1.01 (0.99)	14.52 ***
DEGREE	0.01	0.02	1.00 (0.99)	0.75
STUDIES	0.09	0.05	1.07 (0.93)	1.80 *
WORK_EXP	0.01	0.04	1.02 (0.98)	0.34
F test	40.92 ***			
Adj R ²	0.35			

* p < 0.10. ** p < 0.05. *** p < 0.01.

After performing the OLS analysis, we examined whether these results were influenced by the endogeneity problem, using the Two-Stage Least Squares (2-SLS) and considering the interdependence of behavioural characteristics and the intention to become an entrepreneur. Hence, we first regressed INT on ATT, SN and PBC and obtained the predicted value of INT. In the second stage, we used the predicted value of INT, ATT, SN and PBC in place of the actual value in the regression test. The regression results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Regression Results Based on 2-SLS.

Model	Beta	Std. Error	VIF (Tolerance)	Student <i>t</i>
Constant	0.93	0.26		3.53 ***
ATT	1.14	0.68	1.03 (0.97)	1.67 *
PBC	0.89	0.33	1.07 (0.93)	2.67 **
SN	1.01	0.07	1.02 (0.98)	14.52 ***
DEGREE	0.01	0.02	1.00 (0.99)	0.75
STUDIES	0.09	0.05	1.07 (0.93)	1.80 *
WORK_EXP	0.01	0.04	1.02 (0.98)	0.34
F test	40.92 ***			
Adj R ²	0.35			

* $p < 0.10$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has investigated the factors that affect Italian female university students in engaging a potential entrepreneurial activity. It is known that a large part of the literature says that women encounter obstacles associated with their gender to gain the credibility and resources in the business world, not for a lack of abilities of women but for more complex reasons. These reasons are directly connected to their personal and professional life. Indeed, the life of women tends to be characterised by a pause period—more or less long—for childbirth and care, which compromise career advancement. Thus, women can hardly reach top management positions and develop adequate savings of resources to invest in their business ventures [65]. In this sense, Carter [66] argued that women entrepreneurs have less initial capital than men owners. Indeed, men use three times more start-up capital than women that is positively and significantly to current value of capital assets, sales turnover and total number of employees.

Due to lack of resources, female entrepreneurs turn to the banking system to have the necessary resources to run their business. In this case, however, a relevant stream of the literature argues that women entrepreneurs meet several more financial barriers than men counterparts when seeking bank finance [65]. Thus, female-managed firms are less likely to obtain a bank loan and, yet, when they succeed in borrowing, they are charged higher interest rates.

Overall, it seems that a glass ceiling against women exists [66–70] and prevents the implementation of women entrepreneurs. In this regard, the European Commission is working with European countries to overcome the factors that make entrepreneurship a less attractive option for women than for men and encourage them to start their own companies [22,71–73]. This aspect is of particular relevance because our findings document a positive statistical relation between woman attitude, social pressure, perceived behavioural control and the intention to become an entrepreneur.

Indeed, the SN components is the strongest logical construct in the sample, suggesting that social recognition is very important for the students interviewed [17,47,74,75]. To this aim, some scholars have established that the entrepreneurial intentions are characterised by the individual’s perceived feasibility because they may influence the start-up of entrepreneurial initiatives [23,76,77]. Generally, students are still in the stage of finding out their career choice preferences, so the opinions of parents, partners, friends and important others might be influential in this process. In addition, PBC has a positive effect on the entrepreneurial intentions of women. Probably, according to Ajzen [34], high perceived behavioural control explains that female students are sure to translate their intentions into action. Moreover, they have a higher perception of the ease of performing the entrepreneurial behaviour according to their past experience as well as anticipated impediments and obstacles [78].

Lastly, the perceived ATT of entrepreneurial behaviour affects female students’ intention to become entrepreneurs. In particular, policy initiatives, such as those promoted by the European Union (EU), influence this logical construct [26] and lead women to consider entrepreneurial activity of appeal. With regard to control variables, the variable STUDIES shows a significant association with women

intention to become entrepreneurs. Indeed, university business courses promote entrepreneurship by offering specific training programs and activities capable of developing an enterprise culture. Hence, the creation of an entrepreneurial culture within universities business courses is one of the main factors that influence students to be entrepreneurs.

This study contributes to the academic debate about entrepreneurial intentions, education and training, offering a comprehensive investigation on the factors that affects Italian female students' intentions and motivations to promote an entrepreneurial activity. However, the research suffers from a limitation linked to the behavioural intention that is the most important predictor of intention [34,35,79], but it does not always result in actual behaviour [75]. This is a typical limitation of the TPB. In addition, it could be interesting to find out, in a few years, if the students have carried out their intentions to become entrepreneurs. In this regard, some studies [76] demonstrate how students recognised the crucial role of universities to acquire business skills, but their opinions remained mainly at the level of theoretical judgements and not followed by corresponding behaviour.

Overall, future research could investigate, first, students' entrepreneurial intentions among different European countries to better understand the drivers of entrepreneurial activities, including also a comparison with men. Secondly, it could be interesting to analyse what are the skills acquired by students that affect the intention to become entrepreneurs [41]. Lastly, it is necessary to develop more studies on gender issues to avoid the aforementioned barriers that affect women entrepreneurship [16]. In this way, it is possible to develop the growth of a country [80].

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