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Mentorship and Venture Growth Intention in a Fragile Context: The Sequential Roles of Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy and Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity

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Abstract

This study examines the association between mentorship and venture growth intention among entrepreneurs who own or manage micro and small enterprises in the fragile Palestinian context. Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory and Identity Theory, it proposes that mentorship is related to venture growth intention through a sequential pathway linking entrepreneurial self-efficacy to entrepreneurial leadership identity. The stimulus–organism–response framework organizes this pathway, positioning mentorship as an external stimulus, entrepreneurial self-efficacy and entrepreneurial leadership identity as successive internal states, and venture growth intention as the intended response. Survey data were collected from 385 Palestinian entrepreneurs (280 women and 105 men) in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling. Mentorship was positively associated with entrepreneurial self-efficacy, which was associated with entrepreneurial leadership identity, which in turn was associated with venture growth intention. The sequential indirect association between mentorship and venture growth intention was significant and accounted for most of their small total association, whereas mentorship had no significant direct association with entrepreneurial leadership identity or venture growth intention. Mentorship explained only 10.1% of the variance in entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and the model explained 43.4% of the variance in venture growth intention. A rival model reversing the order of the two mediators explained venture growth intention equally well but yielded a much weaker sequential pathway. Exploratory gender comparisons detected no significant differences, which does not establish equivalence. The findings suggest that support programs may benefit from addressing entrepreneurs' capability beliefs and leadership identity alongside business advice, with potential relevance to livelihoods and inclusive economic participation. As the study used cross-sectional data, the results indicate associations but do not establish temporal order, causality, or effects on actual business growth.

Keywords: entrepreneurship mentoring; micro and small enterprises; entrepreneurial self-efficacy; entrepreneurial leadership identity; venture growth intention; stimulus–organism–response framework; fragile contexts

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1. Introduction

Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs), driven by entrepreneurship, have an essential role in any economy [1,2], especially in developing countries [3,4] and in fragile and crisis-affected contexts [3]. They create jobs [1,2], promote innovation [5], improve socioeconomic

status [1], reduce poverty [3,4], and can contribute to several Sustainable Development Goals [4]. In many countries, many families depend on MSEs as a major source of income [6]. From a sustainability perspective, entrepreneurs' capacity to maintain or develop their businesses under prolonged uncertainty may have implications for employment and livelihoods, which relate primarily to the economic and social dimensions of sustainability. These links are most relevant to SDG Target 8.3, which calls for the formalization and growth of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises; Target 8.5, on productive employment and decent work for women and men; and Target 5.5, on women's full participation and leadership in economic life [7]. Understanding entrepreneurs' intentions to grow can therefore inform the design of entrepreneurship support in fragile contexts. However, growth intention should be distinguished from actual business growth, and growth itself is not necessarily socially inclusive or environmentally sustainable.

Most of the enterprises worldwide are micro or small, particularly in developing and transition economies, which are estimated to exceed 95% [1,8,9]. A significant number of companies today started as MSEs [10]. In Palestine, around 99% of the enterprises are MSEs employing fewer than 20 employees, and host 75% of employed and self-employed persons [11]. However, Palestinian MSEs operate within an extremely fragile context marked by ongoing occupation, movement restrictions in a fragmented geographical landscape, and repeated economic crises [12,13]. These challenges affect both male and female entrepreneurs, but women face additional socio-cultural barriers, restricted mobility, and limited access to finance and professional networks [14–16]. These conditions may increase the importance of entrepreneurs' perceived capabilities and role identities because they must make strategic decisions under persistent uncertainty. Similarly, psychological resources may become particularly relevant for understanding entrepreneurial intentions in fragile entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The sustainability and growth of MSEs are crucial issues that draw attention from academics and policymakers worldwide [3]. Similarly, there is growing interest in SMEs in Palestine across the academic, governmental, economic, and civil society sectors. However, this interest is challenged by the absence of a unified system and reliable information due to the large informal sector [10,17,18]. Some studies indicate that SMEs' contribution to poverty reduction, development, and income growth is uncertain, especially during crisis and conflict cycles, possibly due to limited growth potential [3,19]. Therefore, studying the growth of MSEs is vital for understanding how to support resilient entrepreneurial activity and potentially contribute to sustainable economic development in fragile economies [1,20] such as Palestine.

Behavioral intentions are widely recognized as the most immediate predictor of actual human behavior, including critical entrepreneurial actions such as starting and growing a venture [21,22]. Although researchers frequently depend on actual ex post firm growth as a measure of entrepreneurial success, this approach introduces significant bias by incorrectly assuming that all founders share the same growth goals [23]. In reality, venture growth intention (GI) varies widely, and many founders, particularly women, do not inherently intend or desire to expand their businesses [23,24]. In fragile contexts like Palestine, realized firm growth may reflect not only entrepreneurs' decisions, but also contextual constraints such as mobility restrictions [14,25], market disruption [12,17], financial difficulties [11,26], and political uncertainty [12]. Measuring GI therefore provides a complementary perspective on future-oriented strategic orientation. Entrepreneurs hold diverse views of business success, and growth is not necessarily a goal shared by all business owners [23,27]. Accordingly, GI captures entrepreneurs' ambition to expand their ventures, whereas past growth reflects what they have already achieved. GI may also have broader economic relevance. Stam et al. [28] found that the prevalence of growth-oriented entrepreneurs

was more strongly associated with national economic growth than general start-up or self-employment rates, a finding also highlighted by Zampetakis et al. [22]. Given the study's forward-looking focus, it therefore examines venture growth intention rather than realized business performance. For this reason, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence of subsequent venture growth or broader economic outcomes.

Previous studies have indicated the need for adaptive capacity and resilience in crisis environments [1,3,29]. However, these studies often focus on temporary or irregular crises. In contrast, the Palestinian context is a prolonged crisis environment [11,17]. This requires a deeper understanding of how psychological mechanisms, among male and female entrepreneurs, are associated with their GI. Specifically, entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) and entrepreneurial leadership identity (ELI) may help explain the association between mentorship (ME) and GI [16,30,31]. While evidence shows that ME is associated with ESE and that self-efficacy and entrepreneurial identity relate to entrepreneurial intentions, research examining these relationships through a sequential psychological pathway is scarce, particularly in fragile entrepreneurial contexts like Palestine.

Grounded in Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), ME may support the development of ESE through processes such as role modeling, emotional support, social persuasion, guidance, and knowledge sharing [16,32–35]. Whereas SCT explains entrepreneurs' beliefs in their capabilities, Identity Theory explains how they come to see themselves as entrepreneurial leaders and why ELI may be associated with founders' intentions to scale and develop their enterprises [24,30,36]. Linking the two, capability beliefs are expected to precede leadership self-definition, because entrepreneurs who are confident in performing key entrepreneurial tasks have a stronger basis for claiming the leader role; this ordering is developed further in Section 2. The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework links external stimuli to responses through internal states [37,38]. In this study, S–O–R specifies the ordered structure of the model: ME is positioned as an external stimulus, ESE and ELI as successive cognitive and identity-based internal states, and GI as an intentional response. SCT explains how the stimulus relates to capability beliefs, Identity Theory explains how these beliefs relate to leadership self-definition, and in turn, to venture growth intention, and S–O–R integrates these explanations into a single sequential pathway that neither theory specifies on its own. These psychological processes may be particularly relevant in crisis-affected contexts as entrepreneurs must continuously adapt to uncertainty and external shocks [3,24,39,40].

In addition to ESE, ELI has been identified as a psychological factor associated with entrepreneurial behaviors [24,30]. It reflects the extent to which individuals see themselves as entrepreneurs and leaders. In contexts such as Palestine, a strong ELI may support entrepreneurs' intentions to pursue growth despite external constraints. ME may contribute to ELI development by exposing entrepreneurs to leadership role models and providing opportunities for strategic thinking and experiential learning [24,30,41,42].

Although ME, ESE, and ELI have each been linked to GI, previous studies have often examined these factors separately or in different combinations [24,30,42,43], with limited attention to their sequential integration within a single framework. Research conducted in relatively stable settings may not fully capture how these relationships operate in prolonged crisis environments such as Palestine [42,44]. In particular, limited understanding remains of how ME is associated with GI through ESE and ELI in sequence under conditions of persistent uncertainty and constraints [24,29,42]. It is also unclear whether this sequential pathway, rather than a direct association or a single-mediator pathway, best accounts for the relationship between ME and GI.

This study aims to address these gaps by developing and testing an integrated framework that examines the relationship between ME and GI through the individual and sequen-

tial mediating roles of ESE and ELI [21,24,34]. The framework is deliberately focused on mentorship as the focal predictor. It comprises five hypotheses: one concerning the direct association between ME and GI, and four concerning the indirect associations through ESE, ELI, or both, with the sequential pathway as the central proposition. By targeting both male and female entrepreneurs, the study also adopts an exploratory gender-comparative perspective to explore whether these relationships differ across groups within a context of continuous crisis [16,22]. This contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence from a fragile and under-researched context [42,44]. The findings may also inform the design of inclusive and context-sensitive support programs [24,43]. The research questions to be answered are:

RQ1: How is Mentorship (ME) associated with Venture Growth Intention (GI) among entrepreneurs owning or managing MSEs in the fragile Palestinian entrepreneurial context?

RQ2: Through what psychological mechanisms (entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) and entrepreneurial leadership identity (ELI)) is mentorship (ME) associated with Venture Growth Intention (GI)?

RQ3: Do the proposed structural relationships differ between female and male entrepreneurs?

The hypotheses developed in Section 2 correspond to these questions: H1 addresses RQ1, H2 to H5 address RQ2, and RQ3 is examined through an exploratory multigroup comparison without formal hypotheses.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it integrates SCT and Identity Theory within the S–O–R framework to examine the sequential psychological pathway linking ME to GI, which is the study's central proposition, and it assesses this pathway alongside direct and single-mediator alternatives and a rival ordering of the two mediators. Second, it extends the literature to a prolonged fragile entrepreneurial context that is largely under-researched. Third, it discusses the implications of its findings for designing psychologically informed entrepreneurship support aimed at promoting more resilient and inclusive economic participation.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Bandura [32], evolved from Social Learning Theory (SLT) [45]. SLT proposes that people acquire new knowledge and shape their actions through the observation of others within their social environments [40,45]. SCT was introduced to provide a more comprehensive explanation of human functioning by factoring in internal cognitive processes [46]. At its core, SCT emphasizes reciprocal determinism, whereby personal (cognitive) factors, behavior, and environmental influences interact bidirectionally to shape learning and behavior [32,46].

Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) refers to an individual's belief and self-assurance in their ability to successfully perform the specific tasks and roles needed to achieve entrepreneurial outcomes [15,34,46], start a new venture successfully [21], and cope effectively with the adversity arising from prolonged crisis conditions [47]. ESE is recognized as a key predictor of entrepreneurs' performance and attitudes [31,48] and one of the key personal factors in entrepreneurship that is associated with the development of entrepreneurial intentions among individuals to start or grow a new business [34,35,49]. Within the S–O–R framework, external stimuli are linked to responses through individuals' internal psychological states [37,38]. In the present model, ESE represents the capability-belief component of the organism, alongside the identity component represented by ELI. SCT explains how mentorship may contribute to these

efficacy beliefs, while S–O–R situates them within the proposed relationship between mentorship as an external stimulus and GI as an intentional response.

2.2. Bridging Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Identity Theory: From ESE to ELI

Identity theory posits that a person's self-understanding forms the basis of how they interpret events, frame their motivations, and guide their actions [50]. According to this theory, self-identity is composed of a collection of roles that a person plays, driving habitual activities to validate their internal self-concept [30]. The theory has historically evolved along two closely related strands: one focusing on how external social structures shape self-identity, and the other focusing on the internal dynamics of self-processes [50]. From a structural perspective, identities are organized in a hierarchy where identity salience is the probability that a specific identity will be invoked across various situations. This salience is heavily shaped by commitment, which refers to the degree to which an individual's meaningful social relationships depend on possessing a particular identity [50].

ESE may provide the conceptual bridge between SCT and Identity Theory [24]. Through mentoring, entrepreneurs may strengthen their confidence in their entrepreneurial capabilities, which may be reflected in their ESE [16]. Cognitive interpretations of leadership experiences may contribute to the development of a leader's self-identity, as individuals who perceive themselves as capable of performing leadership tasks may be more likely to identify as leaders [30]. Therefore, a stronger sense of competence may provide a psychological foundation for entrepreneurs to internalize the leadership role and develop an ELI [30]. This reasoning underpins the proposed ordering of ESE before ELI: confidence in performing entrepreneurial tasks may support identification with the entrepreneurial leadership role. This sequence is most plausible for entrepreneurs who are still consolidating their role as venture leaders, such as those with limited management experience, and in settings where competence is repeatedly tested, as in prolonged crisis conditions. Related evidence from virtual teams indicates that self-efficacy and team identification operate as separate mediating mechanisms through which leader self-sacrifice relates to prosocial behavior [51]. Although that study does not concern entrepreneurs or mentorship, it supports treating capability beliefs and identification as distinct mechanisms. However, the proposed ordering is a theoretical proposition; reciprocal relationships or an alternative ordering in which ELI reinforces ESE remain plausible and cannot be ruled out by the cross-sectional design [52]. An alternative ordering is therefore examined as a sensitivity analysis (Section 4.6).

2.3. Mentorship in the Entrepreneurial Process

Entrepreneurial mentoring is a developmental relationship in which experienced entrepreneurs support novice or prospective entrepreneurs [16]. As a form of social support, mentoring may strengthen entrepreneurs' confidence in their capabilities, facilitate the transition into entrepreneurship, and contribute to the development of their entrepreneurial identity [16,31]. Mentors do not provide only technical support; through their experience, they also encourage the mentee to discover new opportunities and ways to start or grow their businesses [16,31,53]. Mentoring relationships also differ in form and intensity. Rechter and Avnimelech [54] distinguished intensive personal mentoring from ad hoc mentoring and showed that the two should not be treated as equivalent forms of exposure. In this study, mentorship refers to the frequency with which entrepreneurs report receiving mentoring functions, such as encouragement, practical guidance, and feedback, from mentors or role models, whether in formal programs or informal relationships.

Mentorship serves as a key external source of support in the entrepreneurial process [16,24]. In addition to access to finance, sufficient mentorship (ME) and training

are seen as key support for new businesses in addressing multiple critical challenges [2], particularly in crisis-affected contexts [3]. Access to mentorship is highly valuable for entrepreneurs and new startups, and incubators and accelerators consider it a core service [2]. Within the S–O–R framework adopted in this study, mentorship represents an external developmental stimulus.

According to SCT, mentorship may support the development of ESE through four sources of efficacy information: mastery experiences, social persuasion, vicarious learning, and psychological and emotional states [16,31,34]. Mentorship may support these four sources by providing role models, feedback, encouragement, emotional support, and guided learning through experience [15,16,31,34]. Mentoring may therefore contribute to ESE, which in turn may encourage entrepreneurs to apply their skills, persist in entrepreneurial activities, and pursue venture growth [16].

Empirical studies have reported a positive relationship between ME and ESE. A recent study found that mentoring within entrepreneurship education programs was positively related to participants' ESE and emerged as the most influential factor by enriching learning experience and increasing exposure to role models [43]. Similarly, different studies found positive relationships between mentorship and ESE [16,31]. The relationship between ME and ESE therefore forms the first link in the indirect pathways proposed in Section 2.6 (H2, H4, and H5).

2.4. Identity Theory and Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity (ELI)

Entrepreneurial Leadership, increasingly viewed as a distinct leadership approach [55], refers to the ability of individuals to recognize and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities by creating value while mobilizing and influencing both internal and external stakeholders to support and realize a shared venture vision [24,30]. Entrepreneurial leadership emphasizes a people-centered orientation that empowers and motivates followers to think entrepreneurially, fostering creativity, adaptability, and resilience in dynamic environments [40]. Through their functional competencies, entrepreneurial leaders inspire individuals and teams to move beyond conventional work practices, embrace innovation, and undertake entrepreneurial actions. They achieve this by recognizing and developing the capabilities of employees, strengthening their self-efficacy, and aligning individual efforts with the broader entrepreneurial vision [55,56].

Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity (ELI) refers to an entrepreneur's perception of themselves as an entrepreneurial leader. It reflects how they understand their role as leaders and how that relates to their intentions, motivation, and behavior [24,30]. As a cognitive schema, ELI organizes knowledge and guides decision-making and interactions throughout the entrepreneurial process [50,57], including venture growth [30,57]. Therefore, understanding ELI is essential for explaining entrepreneurial leadership and its relationship with entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes [24,30,58]. ELI concerns how entrepreneurs define themselves, whereas GI concerns a goal state, namely their intention to expand their ventures. The two are therefore conceptually distinct: an entrepreneur may identify strongly as a leader yet not intend to grow, for example, when stability or survival is prioritized over expansion [23,27]. Within the S–O–R framework adopted in this study, ELI represents the identity-related component of the organism, while GI represents the intentional response.

Once developed, ELI may become an important source of motivation for future behavior [30,36]. Identity Theory suggests that individuals are motivated to behave in ways that match their internal identity standards. They continuously seek to build consistency between their attitudes and their actions [30]. As opportunity exploitation and strategic scaling are fundamental aspects of entrepreneurial leadership, an entrepreneur holding a stronger ELI is expected to report stronger GI. From this perspective, intending to ex-

pand the business may serve to verify their identity as an entrepreneurial leader through identity-congruent behavior [30,36].

Relational exposure to experienced mentors may play an important role in the identity-building process of novice entrepreneurs. Rather than acting solely as business advisors, mentors operate within a relational 'community of practice' that inducts novices into the professional domain, prioritizing the development of 'how to be' over mere skill acquisition [41]. This exposure provides cognitive exemplars that novices can use to emulate observed leadership behaviors, which may support their identification as leaders [30]. Furthermore, mentors provide psychological validation and positive social feedback that can help refine provisional leader identities and consolidate them into internalized self-views [41,57]. Mentorship may therefore also be related to ELI directly, which provides the basis for the indirect pathway through ELI proposed in H3.

Entrepreneurs who believe they are capable of handling entrepreneurial tasks may also be more likely to see themselves as leaders of their ventures. From the perspective of Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy reflects an individual's belief in their ability to perform the actions needed to achieve particular outcomes and plays an important role in how people regulate their behavior and respond to different situations [32,46]. These beliefs may also relate to how entrepreneurs understand their own role within the business. As entrepreneurs become more confident in what they can do, successful experiences managing entrepreneurial tasks may shape how they see themselves as leaders. Lord and Hall [57] similarly explain that leader identity develops alongside leadership skills and experience rather than being separate from the process of becoming a leader. Evidence from entrepreneurship also points in this direction. Duong [59] applied the S–O–R framework and found a positive relationship between e-entrepreneurial self-efficacy and e-entrepreneurial identity aspiration. Although identity aspiration is not the same as entrepreneurial leadership identity, the finding provides related evidence linking capability beliefs with identification with an entrepreneurial role. Based on this reasoning, entrepreneurs with stronger ESE are expected to report a stronger ELI. This relationship is the central link between the two internal states and underlies H4 and H5.

2.5. Venture Growth Intention and Its Direct Association with Mentorship

Limited access to information and support can limit business growth [2,60]. However, previous research suggests that mentorship can provide support relevant to business growth, as it has been associated with entrepreneurs' self-efficacy, problem-solving abilities, emotional resilience, and capacity to overcome barriers to business creation and expansion [16,61,62].

Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) has consistently been identified as a significant predictor of entrepreneurs' intentions to pursue business growth. Previous studies indicate that entrepreneurs with higher ESE are more likely to pursue ambitious business goals, recover quickly from setbacks, and demonstrate the resilience required to achieve venture growth [39]. Empirical evidence further shows that high levels of self-efficacy are associated with superior entrepreneurial outcomes, including start-up survival, entrepreneurial income, and innovation-oriented growth, suggesting that confidence in one's entrepreneurial capabilities may be related to stronger growth aspirations [47]. Although these outcomes are distinct from growth intention, they provide related evidence of the relevance of efficacy beliefs to entrepreneurial activity. Similarly, research has found that entrepreneurial self-efficacy is positively related to entrepreneurial intentions, with evidence indicating that entrepreneurs possessing higher ESE are also more likely to develop high-growth entrepreneurial intentions regardless of gender [15]. Collectively, these findings suggest that entrepreneurs who have greater confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities are more

inclined to pursue the expansion and long-term growth of their ventures. This relationship forms the final link of the indirect pathway proposed in H2.

Entrepreneurial leadership has consistently been associated with behaviors and outcomes that support business growth. Research shows that entrepreneurial leadership is positively related to innovation work behavior [55] and to SME performance through team creativity, dynamic capabilities, and competitive advantage [56]. Entrepreneurial leaders also inspire employees to pursue organizational goals while shaping strategic decisions relevant to firm performance, particularly in SMEs where leaders have greater discretion [56]. Furthermore, entrepreneurial success is closely linked to leaders who encourage creativity and innovation among their followers [56]. These findings concern leadership behaviors and outcomes, whereas ELI concerns entrepreneurs' identification with the leadership role. Extending this evidence to the level of self-definition, entrepreneurs who possess a stronger Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity are more likely to demonstrate higher intentions to grow their businesses [30]. This relationship forms the final link of the indirect pathways proposed in H3 and H5.

Mentorship may also be directly associated with entrepreneurs' growth intentions. Through advice, shared experience, and exposure to different approaches to business challenges, mentors can help entrepreneurs recognize opportunities and consider possibilities for the future development of their ventures. Previous research has linked entrepreneurial mentoring with important entrepreneurial outcomes [16], while Yitshaki [63] showed that mentors can influence entrepreneurs' role identity and changes in their business models. However, mentors can sometimes have a non-significant or even negative direct relationship with a founder's immediate project-level intentions, as they increase the mentee's realistic awareness of the initial business limitations [31]. Although these intentions differ from venture growth intention, this finding suggests that mentoring does not necessarily encourage more ambitious intentions. Nevertheless, the opportunities and guidance provided through mentorship offer a theoretical basis for expecting a positive association with intentions to expand the venture. Alongside the indirect pathways through ESE and ELI, the model therefore examines a direct association between mentorship as the stimulus and GI as the intentional response. Testing this direct association also makes it possible to determine whether any indirect associations complement a direct relationship or account for the relationship between ME and GI on their own. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. *Mentorship (ME) is positively associated with Venture Growth Intention (GI).*

2.6. The Mediating and Sequential Mediating Roles of ESE and ELI

The relationships discussed in Sections 2.3–2.5 form the components of four indirect pathways through which mentorship may be related to GI or to ELI. These pathways address RQ2 and are stated as H2 to H5 below. Their component relationships (ME and ESE, ME and ELI, ESE and ELI, ESE and GI, and ELI and GI) are estimated in the model and reported in Section 4, but are not stated as separate hypotheses. This keeps the hypotheses focused on the study's research questions and on the sequential pathway as its central proposition.

Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) has consistently been identified as a key psychological mechanism linking mentoring with entrepreneurial outcomes. Prior research indicates that mentoring is positively related to entrepreneurs' confidence in their ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks, with ESE mediating the relationship between mentoring and important career-related outcomes, including entrepreneurial persistence, job satisfaction, and intention to remain self-employed [16,31]. Similarly, exposure to entrepreneurial role models and mentoring relationships has been related to stronger entrepreneurial inten-

tions through higher self-efficacy, suggesting ESE as a pathway linking social support with entrepreneurial motivation and future-oriented intentions [64]. Since GI reflects entrepreneurs' intentions to expand their ventures, it is reasonable to expect that mentoring is indirectly associated with GI through ESE [16,31]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. *Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) mediates the relationship between Mentorship (ME) and Venture Growth Intention (GI).*

Mentors can support entrepreneurs' identity development by providing a 'community of practice' and an identity workspace in which they develop their understanding of themselves as entrepreneurs [16,41]. Identity Theory suggests that internalized identities guide intentions and motivate behaviors consistent with individuals' self-understanding [30,58]. Building on the relationships between ME and ELI, and between ELI and GI discussed in Sections 2.4 and 2.5, mentorship may therefore be indirectly associated with growth intention through entrepreneurs' identification with the entrepreneurial leadership role. ELI is thus proposed as a potential mediator of the relationship between ME and GI.

H3. *Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity (ELI) mediates the relationship between Mentorship (ME) and Venture Growth Intention (GI).*

Building on the relationship between mentoring and ESE discussed above, H4 considers whether ESE also helps explain the association between mentorship and ELI [16,31]. Mentoring may also relate to how entrepreneurs understand their professional roles. Yitshaki [63] found that certain forms of advice seeking were associated with mentors' influence on entrepreneurial role identity and business-model change. From an identity-theory perspective, identities develop and gain importance through social interaction, commitment, and the meanings individuals attach to the roles they occupy [50]. Taken together, these arguments suggest that mentoring may first relate to entrepreneurs' beliefs in their ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks. Greater confidence in carrying out these tasks may then make it easier for them to see leadership as part of who they are as entrepreneurs. Accordingly, ESE is expected to mediate the relationship between mentorship and ELI.

H4. *Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) mediates the relationship between Mentorship (ME) and Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity (ELI).*

H5 extends H4 by adding the relationship between ELI and GI, forming the full sequential pathway linking mentorship with GI through ESE and ELI. Entrepreneurs who feel confident in managing their businesses may gradually begin to see themselves as leaders, and Lord and Hall [57] link leader identity development with leadership skills and experience. This may also relate to decisions about business growth, as such decisions can reflect how entrepreneurs understand their role in the venture. Dhakal et al. [30] found that ELI had a strong positive association with GI ($\beta = 0.636$, $p < 0.001$), and from an identity-theory perspective, people often act in line with roles that are important to them [50]. The S–O–R framework provides the organizing logic for this pathway, proposing that external stimuli (S) are linked to behavioral responses (R) through individuals' internal psychological states (O) [38]. Within this framework, the organism represents the cognitive, emotional, and psychological processes through which individuals interpret and respond to external stimuli.

Applied here, S–O–R directs attention to how external mentoring support is internally interpreted and related to growth intentions. SCT explains the development of capability

beliefs through mentoring experiences, while Identity Theory explains how identification with the leadership role can motivate identity-consistent intentions. Their integration distinguishes confidence in performing entrepreneurial tasks from seeing oneself as an entrepreneurial leader and connects both to the intended response. S–O–R contributes the ordered structure that joins these two explanations into a single pathway, which neither theory specifies on its own.

Within the proposed model, the organism is represented by a sequential cognitive and identity-based process. ESE constitutes the first internal mechanism (O1), reflecting entrepreneurs' beliefs in their capabilities, while ELI represents the subsequent identity-based mechanism (O2), reflecting the extent to which leadership becomes integrated into their entrepreneurial self-concept. The proposed ordering rests on the argument that confidence in performing entrepreneurial tasks may support internalization of the leadership role, particularly when entrepreneurs interpret those capabilities as relevant to leading their ventures. This draws on the connection between leadership skills, experience, and self-concept discussed by Lord and Hall [57], without assuming that capability development and identity operate exclusively in one direction.

Duong [59] provides a related empirical application of this sequential logic within the S–O–R framework. The study conceptualized AI literacy as an external stimulus, e-entrepreneurial self-efficacy and e-entrepreneurial identity aspiration as sequential internal organismic mechanisms, and e-entrepreneurial intention as the resulting response. It reported a significant serial indirect effect through e-entrepreneurial self-efficacy and e-entrepreneurial identity aspiration ($\beta = 0.174$, $p < 0.001$) [59]. Although the constructs and context differ from those examined here, the finding provides a precedent for proposing successive capability-related and identity-related components within the organism.

Building on this theoretical and empirical logic, mentorship is conceptualized as an external developmental stimulus (S), ESE and ELI as the proposed sequential organism components (O1 and O2), and GI as the intentional response (R). Accordingly, ESE and ELI are proposed to operate as sequential internal mechanisms through which mentorship is associated with GI. As acknowledged in Section 2.2, this is a theoretical ordering rather than an established temporal sequence; the cross-sectional design cannot exclude alternative or reciprocal relationships.

H5. *Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) and Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity (ELI) sequentially mediate the relationship between Mentorship (ME) and Venture Growth Intention (GI).*

2.7. Gender Differences in Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy, Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity, and Venture Growth Intention

Gender has long been recognized as an important factor influencing entrepreneurial processes and outcomes [15,47]. Although women's participation in entrepreneurship has increased substantially [15,65], entrepreneurial growth continues to be shaped by persistent gender stereotypes and social expectations [15,66,67]. Entrepreneurship, particularly high-growth entrepreneurship, remains strongly associated with masculine characteristics, creating barriers that influence how women evaluate their entrepreneurial capabilities and career opportunities [15,68,69]. Consequently, women often report lower entrepreneurial self-efficacy than men, largely because of differences in entrepreneurial experience, cultural norms, and social expectations rather than actual entrepreneurial ability [15,29,47,70]. These findings suggest that gender continues to be related to entrepreneurial growth primarily through psychological and contextual mechanisms rather than differences in competence [15,47].

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy represents one of the primary mechanisms through which gender differences may be reflected in entrepreneurial behavior. Previous studies indicate that women frequently underestimate their entrepreneurial capabilities and consequently limit their entrepreneurial aspirations because of lower confidence in their skills [35]. Gender stereotypes have been linked to lower entrepreneurial self-efficacy among women, which in turn has been related to lower intention to pursue business growth [15]. This evidence is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory in suggesting that strengthening entrepreneurial self-efficacy may help mitigate stereotype-related barriers and support women's entrepreneurial intentions [15,35].

Gender stereotypes extend beyond entrepreneurial activity to entrepreneurial leadership identity. Women entrepreneurs frequently encounter social expectations that leadership is inherently masculine, making it more difficult to perceive themselves as entrepreneurial leaders [15,44]. Women who do not conform to stereotypical leadership expectations are often judged as less competent despite demonstrating comparable capabilities [24]. These perceptions are particularly pronounced in cultures characterized by traditional gender norms and may contribute to weaker entrepreneurial leadership identity among women by undermining leadership self-perceptions [15,24,44].

Despite these barriers, many female entrepreneurs successfully overcome gender stereotypes by developing a strong entrepreneurial identity. Rather than allowing discrimination to limit their ambitions, growth-oriented women frequently perceive obstacles as challenges that can be overcome and integrate entrepreneurship into their positive self-concept [30]. This resilience may enable them to pursue ambitious business growth despite operating within environments characterized by persistent gender biases [15,30].

Mentoring has been identified as an important mechanism for addressing gender-related barriers in entrepreneurship. Through role modeling, encouragement, constructive feedback, and access to professional networks, mentors can strengthen women's entrepreneurial confidence and entrepreneurial self-efficacy [15,53]. Exposure to successful female entrepreneurs may further reinforce entrepreneurial leadership identity by demonstrating that gender-related barriers can be overcome, and has been linked to higher confidence and venture growth intention among women [15].

Studies have not reached the same conclusion about gender differences in entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Some found that women report lower task-specific ESE, especially when entering entrepreneurship. This has been linked to gender stereotypes and the social expectations surrounding entrepreneurial roles [15,35]. Van Ewijk [71] further indicates that gender differences in ESE may involve calibration, that is, how closely self-assessed capability corresponds to actual capability, rather than only differences in average confidence; mean-level comparisons of ESE between women and men should therefore be interpreted with care. However, the difference seems less clear among people who are already running a business. Caliendo et al. [47] found that generalized self-efficacy was quite similar for male and female founders. Generalized self-efficacy concerns confidence across a broad range of situations, whereas the ESE examined in this study concerns confidence in performing entrepreneurial tasks; these constructs should therefore be distinguished. Caliendo et al. [47] also reported positive effects of self-efficacy on business survival, income, and innovation for both groups. Interestingly, some of these effects were stronger for women. This suggests that differences between male and female entrepreneurs cannot be explained simply by differences in their confidence or ability. The opportunities and support available to them may also matter. Mentoring, coaching, and contact with entrepreneurial role models are examples of support that can strengthen self-efficacy and encourage entrepreneurial development [47,64].

Gender may also matter in the relationships examined in this study. Women and men do not necessarily enter entrepreneurship with the same experiences, opportunities, or social expectations, and these differences may affect how they develop entrepreneurial confidence and identity [15,22,30]. Mentoring is particularly relevant here. Previous studies show that mentoring can support female entrepreneurs in dealing with some of the social and psychological difficulties they face [16,31]. What remains less clear is whether mentorship is associated with ESE, entrepreneurial leadership identity, and growth intention in the same way for women and men. There is even less evidence on this question in fragile and conflict-affected settings [3,42]. Because prior research does not provide a clear basis for predicting gender differences in the proposed relationships, the analysis is exploratory and is not designed to establish equivalence between groups. Accordingly, the study uses PLS-MGA to examine whether these relationships differ between male and female entrepreneurs [72], without stating formal hypotheses (RQ3).

Based on the preceding theoretical discussion, Figure 1 presents the proposed research model, including the five hypotheses and the additional paths estimated in the model.

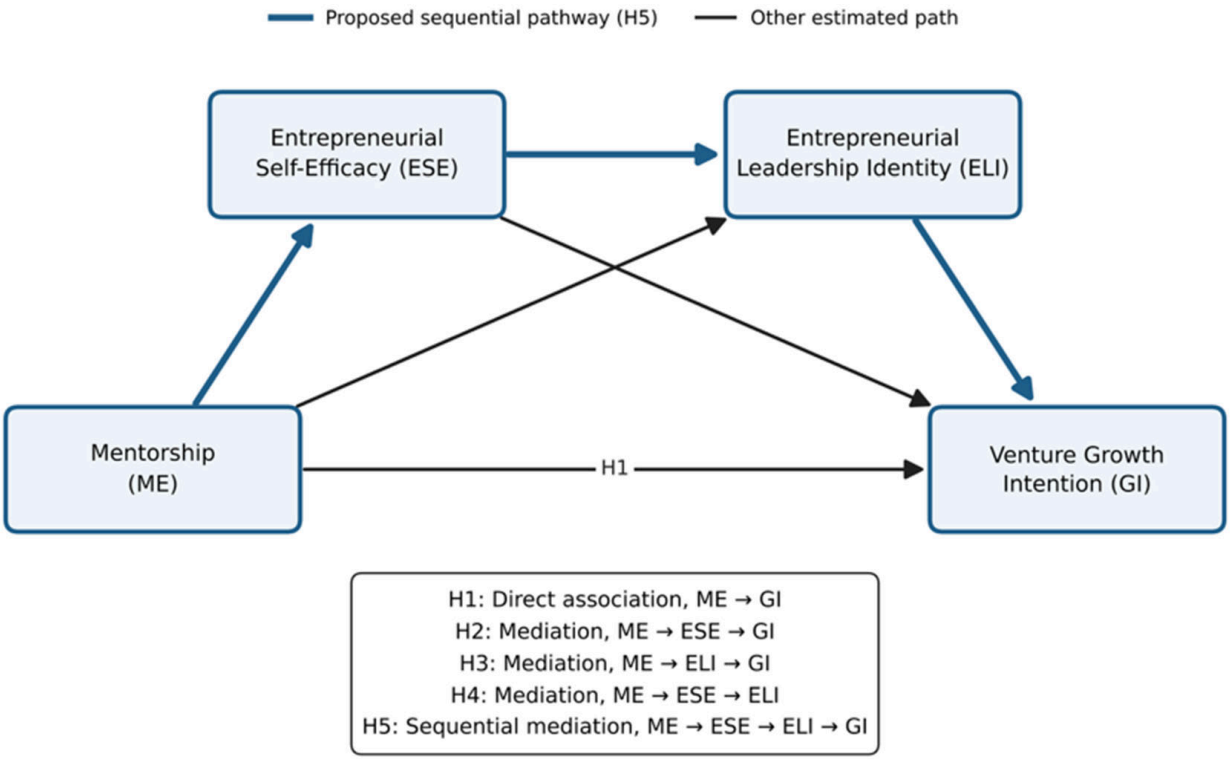


Figure 1. Research model.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the structural relationships among mentorship (ME), entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE), entrepreneurial leadership identity (ELI), and venture growth intention (GI). It also examined potential gender differences across these relationships. Data were collected at a single point in time using a structured survey, with the individual entrepreneur who owned or managed a micro or small enterprise serving as the unit of analysis. The analytical approach allowed multiple direct and indirect relationships to be assessed simultaneously [72,73]. Because prior research did not provide a clear basis for predicting gender differences in the proposed relationships, the gender analysis was treated as an exploratory multigroup comparison.

The proposed relationships were examined using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 (version 4.1.1.7; SmartPLS GmbH, Bönningstedt, Germany) [74]. PLS-SEM was appropriate because the study aimed to explain and predict relationships among latent constructs and included a relatively complex structural model involving mediation [75] and a higher-order construct [72,76,77]. The approach also supports comparisons of structural relationships between predefined groups when measurement invariance and multigroup analysis procedures are applied [76,78], as well as out-of-sample predictive assessment [73]. However, because the data were collected at one point in time, the estimated relationships are interpreted as associations and do not establish temporal order or causality. Accordingly, significant indirect effects indicate that the data are statistically compatible with the proposed ordering, but they do not establish temporal precedence or rule out reverse, reciprocal, or third-variable explanations.

3.2. Study Context

To understand the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Palestine and explain how ME, ESE, and ELI operate, it is essential to understand the local context, including institutional, economic, and geopolitical conditions. In the second quarter of 2025, unemployment in the West Bank reached 28.6%, and the labor force participation rate for women was only 17.8%. Unemployment among youth graduates aged 19 to 29 with an intermediate diploma or higher reached 43.5%, including 56.6% among women and 28.6% among men [79]. These conditions preceded the data collection in November 2025. Later figures indicate that these challenges persisted into the second quarter of 2026, when unemployment remained high at 27.9% and female labor force participation remained low at 17.9% [80]. In addition, almost half of Palestine's economy is informal. Around two-thirds of the informal Palestinian enterprises see no benefit from registering, as they think that the profit will be higher without paying taxes and complying with labor law, including paying minimum wage and other benefits for their workers [17].

For many years, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders have tried to support entrepreneurs in creating new businesses and job opportunities [11,42]. They have provided different types of services such as mentorship, access to finance, and business development services [11,25]. However, the effects of this support were limited because it was fragmented, unstable, and short-term, and depended on donor-funded projects that had fixed timelines and focused on starting new micro or small businesses rather than supporting existing MSEs to grow [11,14,25].

Another reason for the limited impact of some support programs may be that they target unemployed individuals seeking immediate income opportunities rather than entrepreneurs aiming to start a sustainable business of their own [11,17]. Some support programs select beneficiaries based on vulnerability and unemployment status and often push them to start a business without considering their cognitive and psychological readiness [11,81]. This created many new ventures with limited productivity that struggled to survive or scale, limiting SME sector growth in Palestine [11]. Albatran and Atikbay [42] suggested studying psychological factors among entrepreneurs in Palestine to understand what motivates their entrepreneurial behavior in such a fragile and high-risk context, with political instability, restricted movement, and a fragmented market with limited access to financial and business support services. These facts and findings highlight the importance of studying ESE and ELI among entrepreneurs in Palestine.

3.3. Study Population and Sampling

A purposive non-probability sampling strategy was employed to recruit entrepreneurs who owned or managed micro, very small, and small enterprises in the West Bank and

East Jerusalem because no complete list of registered and unregistered enterprises was available [82]. Enterprises were classified according to the Palestinian national enterprise-size definition: micro enterprises employ 1 to 4 workers, very small enterprises employ 5 to 9 workers, and small enterprises employ 10 to 19 workers [83]. Participants were approached through a broad network of entrepreneurship-support organizations, including the Federation of Palestinian Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, which coordinated the survey distribution through 13 local chambers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; the Business Support Unit of the Ministry of National Economy; entrepreneurship centers and incubators at four universities; five vocational training centers; and three independent business incubators. Although these organizations serve entrepreneurs across diverse geographic areas and economic sectors, reliance on their networks limited the survey's reach to entrepreneurs accessible through these channels. Entrepreneurs connected to support structures may differ from those outside them, for example, in their exposure to mentoring and training. The sample is therefore not representative of all Palestinian MSE owners, and the findings should be generalized with caution. The Gaza Strip was excluded because the conflict and its consequences following October 2023 made data collection infeasible [14,26].

The questionnaire was digitized using Google Forms and distributed electronically in November 2025 through these organizations and their entrepreneurial networks, which covered different geographic areas and economic sectors. Participation was limited to entrepreneurs who owned or managed an enterprise employing between 1 and 19 workers. Prior receipt of mentorship was not an eligibility requirement. Respondents who reported no mentorship or were unsure were retained in the sample and completed the mentorship items alongside the other measures. A total of 385 valid responses were collected and retained for the PLS-SEM analysis. The sample of 385 was considered adequate for estimating the proposed PLS-SEM model based on statistical-power considerations and the complexity of the structural model [72,84].

The study followed established ethical standards for social science research, and ethical approval was obtained from the Girne American University Ethics Committee (approval code: 2024-25/044, approval date: 21 July 2025). The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and informed electronic consent was obtained before their participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they were free to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes.

3.4. Sample Characteristics

The final sample comprised 385 entrepreneurs, including 280 women (72.7%) and 105 men (27.3%). Table 1 presents selected demographic and business characteristics of the respondents. The age profile differed by gender. The largest group of women was aged 35 to 44 years (28.2%), followed by 45 to 54 years (24.3%), whereas the largest group of men was aged 18 to 24 years (38.1%). A bachelor's degree was the most common educational qualification, held by 39.3% of women and 41.9% of men. Respondents represented all 11 governorates of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Women were mainly located in Hebron (19.6%), Bethlehem (17.1%), Tulkarm (16.1%), and Ramallah and Al-Bireh (13.2%). Most of the men in the sample were in Hebron (33.3%) and Ramallah and Al-Bireh (26.7%), followed by Bethlehem (14.3%). Larger proportions of women than men were located in Tulkarm (16.1% female vs. 3.8% male) and Jenin (10.7% vs. 1.9%).

Table 1. Profile of the respondents.

Variable	Category	Women (n = 280)	Men (n = 105)
Age group	18–24	46 (16.4)	40 (38.1)
	25–34	56 (20.0)	28 (26.7)
	35–44	79 (28.2)	17 (16.2)
	45–54	68 (24.3)	16 (15.2)
	55+	31 (11.1)	4 (3.8)
Education	No formal education	2 (0.7)	2 (1.9)
	Primary/lower secondary	18 (6.4)	1 (1.0)
	Secondary	68 (24.3)	9 (8.6)
	Vocational/technical	24 (8.6)	23 (21.9)
	Associate degree/diploma	32 (11.4)	9 (8.6)
	Bachelor's	110 (39.3)	44 (41.9)
	Master's	15 (5.4)	12 (11.4)
	Doctorate/equivalent	3 (1.1)	5 (4.8)
	Other	8 (2.9)	0 (0.0)
Business management experience	<1 year	58 (20.7)	29 (27.6)
	1–3 years	74 (26.4)	34 (32.4)
	4–6 years	68 (24.3)	15 (14.3)
	7–10 years	39 (13.9)	10 (9.5)
	>10 years	41 (14.6)	17 (16.2)
Employees	None	173 (61.8)	47 (44.8)
	1–4	89 (31.8)	44 (41.9)
	5–9	11 (3.9)	9 (8.6)
	10–19	7 (2.5)	5 (4.8)
Economic sector	Agriculture/food	77 (27.5)	12 (11.4)
	Manufacturing/handicrafts	72 (25.7)	17 (16.2)
	Home-based	46 (16.4)	4 (3.8)
	Hospitality/tourism/food	8 (2.9)	12 (11.4)
	ICT/digital	3 (1.1)	16 (15.2)
	Health/beauty/personal care	14 (5.0)	4 (3.8)
	Construction/repairs	2 (0.7)	15 (14.3)
	Retail/wholesale	11 (3.9)	4 (3.8)
	Education/training	9 (3.2)	3 (2.9)
	Other services	5 (1.8)	5 (4.8)
	Finance/real estate/consulting	3 (1.1)	4 (3.8)
	Other specified	30 (10.7)	9 (8.6)
Activity in addition to business	Full-time employee	28 (10.0)	32 (30.5)
	Part-time employee	28 (10.0)	14 (13.3)
	Seeking employment	73 (26.1)	23 (21.9)
	Not seeking employment	119 (42.5)	34 (32.4)
	Other specified	32 (11.4)	2 (1.9)

Note: Values are frequencies, with percentages in parentheses. Gender differences were tested using Pearson's chi-square test, with Cramér's V as the effect size. Some cells for education and economic sector had expected frequencies below 5, so those two tests should be interpreted with caution.

Business-management experience showed smaller differences between the two groups. Although one to three years was the most common category for both women (26.4%) and men (32.4%), women were more highly represented in the four-to-six-year category (24.3% vs. 14.3%). In contrast, a larger proportion of men had less than one year of experience (27.6% vs. 20.7%). The sectoral distribution also differed by gender. Women were mainly engaged in agriculture and food production (27.5%), manufacturing and handicrafts (25.7%), and home-based activities (16.4%). The most common sectors among men were manufacturing and handicrafts (16.2%), ICT and digital services (15.2%), construction

and repairs (14.3%), agriculture and food production (11.4%), and hospitality, tourism, and food services (11.4%). A larger proportion of women than men worked alone without employees (61.8% vs. 44.8%), whereas a larger proportion of men managed enterprises employing one to four workers (41.9% vs. 31.8%). Only 10% of women held full-time employment in addition to running their own businesses compared with 30.5% of men.

Pearson's chi-square tests indicated that women and men differed significantly in age ($\chi^2(4) = 29.33$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.28), education ($\chi^2(8) = 38.97$, $p < 0.001$, V = 0.32), number of employees ($\chi^2(3) = 10.56$, $p = 0.014$, V = 0.17), economic sector ($\chi^2(11) = 100.96$, $p < 0.001$, V = 0.51), and activity in addition to the business ($\chi^2(4) = 31.66$, $p < 0.001$, V = 0.29), but not in business-management experience ($\chi^2(4) = 7.40$, $p = 0.116$, V = 0.14). The largest difference was in the economic sector. These baseline differences are taken into account when interpreting the gender comparisons.

Regarding mentorship exposure, 190 respondents (49.4%) reported receiving mentorship through a formal program, while 85 (22.1%) reported informal mentorship from friends, family, or business contacts. A further 93 respondents (24.2%) reported no mentorship, and 17 (4.4%) were unsure. Overall, the sample included entrepreneurs with diverse demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and business characteristics.

3.5. Research Instruments

The questionnaire was developed primarily using established measurement scales identified in the entrepreneurship and management literature. The instrument used in this study included measures of mentorship (ME), entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE), entrepreneurial leadership identity (ELI), and venture growth intention (GI). Rather than developing new scales, the study adopted previously validated measures. Table 2 presents the number of items used to measure each construct, their original sources, and their response scales; the full item wording is provided in Appendix A (Table A1). ME, ELI, and GI were specified as first-order reflective constructs. ESE was modeled as a reflective-reflective higher-order construct consisting of five reflective lower-order dimensions. It was measured using 22 items across five dimensions: marketing (six items), innovation (four items), management (five items), risk-taking (four items), and financial control (three items) [85]. A reflective specification was adopted because the five dimensions are treated as manifestations of a common underlying belief in one's entrepreneurial capability, rather than as distinct components that jointly define the construct [86]; further justification and the higher-order results are reported in Section 4.1.

Table 2. Constructs and measurement source.

Construct	No. of Items	Source	Response Scale
Mentorship (ME)	10	Baluku, Matagi, et al. [16]	1 (Never) to 5 (Always)
Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy (ESE)	22	Chen et al. [85]	1 (Completely unsure) to 5 (Completely sure)
Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity (ELI)	4	Dhakal et al. [24]	1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)
Venture Growth Intention (GI)	3	Kolvereid and Åmo [87]	1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)

Note: Full item wording is reported in Appendix A (Table A1).

The questionnaire was administered in Arabic. Before the main data collection, the original English items were translated into Arabic by a bilingual expert in the field, and a second, independent language expert reviewed the translation for accuracy, clarity, and

equivalence of meaning with the source items. The Arabic version was then back-translated into English by a translator who had not seen the original items, and the two English versions were compared to resolve discrepancies [86]. Beyond translation, only minor wording adjustments were made to suit the local context, without altering the meaning or content of the source items. The questionnaire was then piloted with 20 entrepreneurs. An open-ended question at the end asked participants whether the questionnaire was clear and invited them to raise questions or comment on any items requiring clarification. Their responses indicated that the questionnaire was clear and understandable; therefore, no further changes were required before the main study.

All items were measured using five-point Likert-type response scales. This format maintains consistency across the measures and reduces the burden on respondents [72]. For mentorship (ME), response options ranged from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The mentorship scale assessed reported experiences of specific mentoring functions, while a separate question on formal or informal mentorship exposure was used only descriptively. Because the items refer to support received from "someone" or from "mentors and role models", respondents without a formal mentor could still report mentoring functions received informally, and those who had received no such support could indicate this by selecting the lower response options. All respondents, including those reporting no mentorship or uncertainty, completed ME1 to ME10. Their item responses determined the mentorship measure used in the structural model, and no scores were assigned on the basis of the exposure category. For entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE), responses ranged from 1 (Completely unsure) to 5 (Completely sure), and for entrepreneurial leadership identity (ELI) and venture growth intention (GI), from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

3.6. Common Method Bias

Because all constructs were measured through a single self-administered questionnaire completed by the same respondents, both procedural and statistical remedies were applied to address common method bias [88]. Procedurally, established scales with clear wording were used, participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality to reduce evaluation apprehension and socially desirable responding [88]. The questionnaire presented the constructs in the following order: mentorship, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, entrepreneurial leadership identity, and venture growth intention, followed by demographic and business characteristics. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted by entering all measurement items into an unrotated principal component analysis. The first factor accounted for 28.9% of the total variance, well below the 50% threshold, indicating that no single factor dominated the covariance among the measures [88]. Nevertheless, no single statistical test can rule out common method variance. Because predictors were presented before outcomes in the same instrument, consistency motives and conceptual overlap among the self-reported psychological constructs may still have contributed to the observed associations, and the results should be interpreted with this possibility in mind.

3.7. Data Analysis Procedure

All questionnaire items were mandatory in the online form; therefore, the dataset contained no missing values. The PLS-SEM algorithm was run using the path weighting scheme, with a maximum of 3000 iterations and a stop criterion of 10^{-7} [72]. The measurement model was assessed through indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (rho_A and rho_C), average variance extracted, and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT), with bootstrap confidence intervals used to test whether the HTMT values were significantly below 0.90 [72,89]. ESE was estimated using the disjoint two-stage ap-

proach [76]. In the first stage, the five lower-order dimensions were included in the model in place of the higher-order construct and linked to the other constructs, and their latent variable scores were saved. In the second stage, these scores served as indicators of the higher-order ESE construct.

The structural model was assessed through inner VIF values, R^2, and f^2 effect sizes. Following Cohen's conventions, f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 were treated as small, medium, and large, respectively, recognizing that these thresholds are heuristics rather than fixed cutoffs [72]. All six structural paths were estimated simultaneously. The direct association between ME and GI tested H1, and the specific indirect associations tested H2 to H5. The remaining direct paths, which form the components of these indirect pathways, and the indirect association between ESE and GI through ELI were estimated and reported but not formally hypothesized. Path coefficients, specific indirect effects, and total effects were tested using bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples, bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) 95% confidence intervals, two-tailed tests at the 0.05 significance level, and [no sign changes] [72]. Out-of-sample predictive power was assessed using PLSpredict with 10 folds and 10 repetitions, comparing indicator-level prediction errors with a linear model benchmark [73]. Measurement invariance across gender groups was assessed using the MICOM procedure with [1000] permutations [78], and group differences were then examined using PLS-MGA [77]. As a sensitivity analysis, a rival model reversing the order of ESE and ELI was estimated with identical settings; its estimates are reported with percentile bootstrap confidence intervals.

4. Results

The analysis began with measurement model assessment and validation of the higher-order ESE construct. This was followed by structural model assessment, including hypothesis testing, mediation analysis, and predictive assessment. Next, measurement invariance was assessed using the MICOM procedure before conducting the gender multigroup analysis. Finally, a sensitivity analysis examined an alternative ordering of the two mediators.

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

Indicator reliability was examined through the outer loadings. Table 3 presents the outer loadings and indicator VIF values for the first stage. The retained indicators loaded between 0.652 and 0.915 on their intended constructs. Four indicators had loadings below 0.708: ME2 (0.652), ME5 (0.677), ESE6 (0.698), and GI3 (0.675). Sensitivity checks assessed the effects of individually excluding each of these indicators. Although removal improved some measurement properties, all four were retained because their loadings exceeded 0.40, their constructs already met the reliability and convergent validity criteria [72], and each captures content not covered by the other items. ME2 reflects the emotional support function of mentoring, and ME5 reflects social persuasion through a mentor's expressed confidence, one of the four sources of efficacy information. ESE6 is the only marketing item that refers to expanding the business, and GI3 is the only growth intention item that refers to the desired pace of growth. Removing these indicators would therefore narrow the content coverage of their constructs.

ESE was measured using the 22-item scale developed by Chen et al. [85], covering marketing, innovation, management, risk-taking, and financial control. ESE was specified as a reflective-reflective higher-order construct, with these five dimensions treated as manifestations of an overarching belief in entrepreneurial capability. This specification is consistent with Snell et al. [90], who modeled the same five ESE dimensions as reflective components of a second-order construct. ESE was estimated using the disjoint two-stage approach [76]. In the first stage, latent-variable scores were obtained for each of the five

dimensions. These scores served as indicators of ESE in the second stage [76]. In the second stage, all five dimensions loaded strongly on the higher-order construct: marketing (0.839), innovation (0.789), management (0.884), risk-taking (0.749), and financial control (0.764). The higher-order construct demonstrated satisfactory reliability and convergent validity (Cronbach's alpha = 0.865, rho_C = 0.903, and AVE = 0.651). Across the first-order constructs, Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.770 to 0.915, composite reliability ranged from 0.852 to 0.929, and all AVE values exceeded 0.50 (Table 4), meeting the recommended criteria [72].

Table 3. Outer loadings and indicator VIF values (first stage).

Construct	Indicator	Loading	VIF
ME	ME1	0.757	2.400
	ME2	0.652	1.828
	ME3	0.748	2.232
	ME4	0.802	2.594
	ME5	0.677	1.623
	ME6	0.793	2.363
	ME7	0.806	2.389
	ME8	0.789	2.592
	ME9	0.784	2.765
	ME10	0.718	2.050
ESE Marketing	ESE1	0.805	2.007
	ESE2	0.813	2.440
	ESE3	0.770	2.065
	ESE4	0.784	1.835
	ESE5	0.796	1.939
	ESE6	0.698	1.468
ESE Innovation	ESE7	0.828	2.386
	ESE8	0.864	2.684
	ESE9	0.772	1.722
	ESE10	0.831	1.928
ESE Management	ESE11	0.781	1.733
	ESE12	0.781	1.888
	ESE13	0.821	2.189
	ESE14	0.844	2.394
	ESE15	0.797	1.935
ESE Risk-taking	ESE16	0.755	1.646
	ESE17	0.735	1.611
	ESE18	0.803	1.587
	ESE19	0.777	1.408

Table 3. *Cont.*

Construct	Indicator	Loading	VIF
ESE Financial Control	ESE20	0.893	2.426
	ESE21	0.913	2.711
	ESE22	0.808	1.642
ELI	ELI1	0.740	1.483
	ELI2	0.864	2.244
	ELI3	0.863	2.311
	ELI4	0.745	1.629
GI	GI1	0.878	2.084
	GI2	0.915	2.324
	GI3	0.675	1.306

Note: Loadings and VIF values are from the first stage of the disjoint two-stage approach. Final-model loadings for ME, ELI, and GI are reported in Figure 2.

Table 4. Construct reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_A)	Composite Reliability (rho_C)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
ELI	0.817	0.825	0.880	0.649
ESE Financial Control	0.842	0.850	0.905	0.761
ESE Innovation	0.842	0.846	0.894	0.679
ESE Management	0.865	0.868	0.902	0.649
ESE Marketing	0.870	0.870	0.902	0.606
ESE Risk-taking	0.772	0.784	0.852	0.589
ESE (higher-order)	0.865	0.881	0.903	0.651
GI	0.770	0.828	0.867	0.688
ME	0.915	0.918	0.929	0.569

Figure 2 presents the final higher-order model and the outer loadings of the indicators for all constructs. Because ESE was modeled as a higher-order construct, the figure presents the loadings of its five lower-order dimensions rather than those of its 22 original indicators. Table 3 reports the first-stage indicator loadings, including those of the 22 original ESE indicators, whereas Figure 2 presents the second-stage higher-order model estimates. The figure also presents the structural path coefficients and R^2 values.

Indicator collinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF) values, which are reported in Table 3. The values ranged from 1.306 for GI3 to 2.765 for ME9. All values were below the threshold of 3.0, which means that indicator collinearity was not problematic [72].

Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT). The values ranged from 0.187 to 0.808, and all were below the threshold of 0.90, supporting discriminant validity among the constructs [72,89]. Bootstrap-based HTMT inference further showed that the upper bounds of all 95% confidence intervals were below 0.90 (Table 5) [89]. The highest HTMT value was between ELI and GI (0.808). This point estimate was below the more conservative threshold of 0.85, although its upper confidence bound (0.880) exceeded that value [89]. Although related, the two constructs differ in their focus: ELI measures entrepreneurial and leadership self-identification (for example, "I think of myself as a leader"), whereas GI measures intentions to pursue business growth (for example, "I want to grow my business fast").

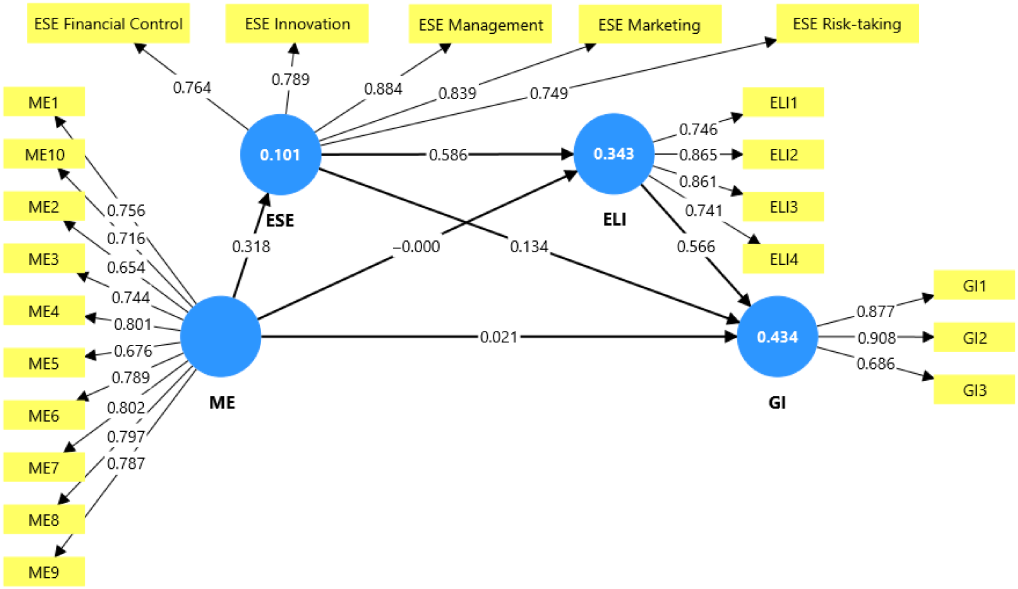


Figure 2. Higher-order measurement and structural model.

Table 5. Heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) for discriminant validity.

Construct Pair	HTMT	95% CI
ESE ↔ ELI	0.692	[0.604, 0.770]
GI ↔ ELI	0.808	[0.734, 0.880]
GI ↔ ESE	0.566	[0.471, 0.658]
ME ↔ ELI	0.210	[0.138, 0.314]
ME ↔ ESE	0.344	[0.241, 0.449]
ME ↔ GI	0.187	[0.100, 0.304]

4.2. Structural Model Assessment

Collinearity among the predictor constructs was assessed using inner variance inflation factor (VIF) values (ME → ESE = 1.000; ME → ELI = 1.113; ESE → ELI = 1.113; ME → GI = 1.113; ELI → GI = 1.522; ESE → GI = 1.634). The values ranged from 1.000 to 1.634, and were below the recommended threshold of 3.0, indicating that collinearity was not problematic in the structural model [72].

The model explained 10.1% of the variance in ESE, 34.3% in ELI, and 43.4% in GI. Accordingly, the model explained a relatively small proportion of the variance in ESE, with mentorship as its sole predictor, whereas it explained larger proportions of the variance in ELI and GI. Most of the variance in ESE is therefore related to factors outside the model. The corresponding adjusted R^2 values were 0.099, 0.340, and 0.429, respectively (Table 6). Their close correspondence with the R^2 values indicates that adjustment for the number of predictors resulted in only minor changes in the explained variance.

Table 6. Explanatory power of the structural model.

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
ESE	0.101	0.099
ELI	0.343	0.340
GI	0.434	0.429

PLSpredict was conducted using 10 folds and 10 repetitions [73]. Table 7 reports the indicator-level results. $Q^2_{predict}$ values were positive for all indicators except ELI2, whose value rounded to 0.000, and ranged up to 0.110 for the marketing dimension of ESE. RMSE was used as the primary prediction error metric because the prediction error distributions were not highly skewed; MAE results are reported for completeness [73]. Compared with the linear model benchmark, PLS-SEM produced lower RMSE values for 11 out of the 12 indicators: all five ESE dimension scores, three of the four ELI indicators, and all three GI indicators. The exception was ELI2. Using MAE, PLS-SEM produced lower values for 9 out of the 12 indicators. According to established guidelines, lower prediction errors for the majority of indicators indicate medium predictive power [73]. However, the $Q^2_{predict}$ values were small, and the differences from the benchmark were marginal, so the model's out-of-sample predictive power is best described as modest.

Table 7. PLSpredict results at the indicator level.

Indicator	$Q^2_{predict}$	PLS-SEM RMSE	LM RMSE	PLS-SEM MAE	LM MAE
ESE Marketing	0.110	0.946	0.956	0.746	0.749
ESE Innovation	0.048	0.978	0.989	0.752	0.765
ESE Management	0.080	0.963	0.970	0.743	0.751
ESE Risk-taking	0.022	0.992	1.000	0.778	0.779
ESE Financial Control	0.034	0.986	0.999	0.773	0.786
ELI1	0.013	0.627	0.633	0.522	0.515
ELI2	0.000	0.742	0.739	0.585	0.584
ELI3	0.013	0.692	0.699	0.554	0.556
ELI4	0.044	0.928	0.932	0.712	0.733
GI1	0.019	0.646	0.647	0.522	0.514
GI2	0.020	0.627	0.636	0.530	0.531
GI3	0.001	0.802	0.819	0.647	0.658

Note: RMSE = root mean squared error; MAE = mean absolute error; LM = linear model benchmark. For ESE, the indicators are the five dimension scores from the first stage.

4.3. Direct Paths and Test of H1

The direct associations were assessed using bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples and bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) 95% confidence intervals (Table 8). Of the six direct paths, only the association between mentorship and GI was formally hypothesized (H1). H1 was not supported, as mentorship was not directly associated with GI ($\beta = 0.021$, 95% CI $[-0.071, 0.108]$). The remaining five paths are the components of the indirect pathways tested in Section 4.4. Among them, mentorship was positively associated with ESE but was not directly associated with ELI. ESE was positively associated with ELI and GI, while ELI was positively associated with GI. The confidence intervals excluded zero for all four significant component paths.

Based on Cohen's conventions (Section 3.7), the path from mentorship to ESE had a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.113$), whereas the paths from mentorship to ELI and to GI had negligible effect sizes. The paths from ESE to ELI ($f^2 = 0.470$) and from ELI to GI ($f^2 = 0.372$) had large effect sizes. The path from ESE to GI ($f^2 = 0.019$) fell just below the 0.02 threshold for a small effect, indicating that although statistically significant, its unique contribution to explaining GI was minimal [72].

Table 8. Direct paths, effect sizes, confidence intervals, and results.

H	Path	β (Path Coefficient)	Sample Mean (M)	STDEV	T-Value	*p*-Value	95% BCa CI	f^2	Result
H1	ME → GI	0.021	0.023	0.046	0.464	0.642	[−0.071, 0.108]	0.001	Not supported
[a]	ME → ESE	0.318	0.326	0.045	7.129	<0.001	[0.220, 0.395]	0.113	Significant
[a]	ME → ELI	−0.000	0.002	0.043	0.000	1.000	[−0.089, 0.080]	0.000	Not significant
[a]	ESE → ELI	0.586	0.588	0.038	15.430	<0.001	[0.501, 0.653]	0.470	Significant
[a]	ESE → GI	0.134	0.134	0.049	2.710	0.007	[0.036, 0.232]	0.019	Significant
[a]	ELI → GI	0.566	0.567	0.046	12.354	<0.001	[0.471, 0.650]	0.372	Significant

Note: [a] Component path of the indirect pathways tested in H2 to H5; estimated and reported but not formally hypothesized.

4.4. Mediation Analysis

The specific indirect effects were assessed using bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples and bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) 95% confidence intervals (Table 9). Three out of the four mediation hypotheses were supported. Mentorship was indirectly associated with GI through ESE (H2) and with ELI through ESE (H4). In addition, the sequential indirect association between mentorship and GI through ESE and then ELI was positive and statistically significant (H5). However, the indirect association between mentorship and GI through ELI alone was not significant (H3). ESE was also indirectly associated with GI through ELI, an additional indirect association that was not formally hypothesized. The confidence intervals excluded zero for all four significant indirect effects. Because the direct associations of mentorship with ELI and GI were not significant, the indirect associations of mentorship with ELI through ESE, with GI through ESE, and with GI through ESE and ELI in sequence represent indirect-only mediation. In contrast, ESE had significant direct and indirect associations with GI, both positive, indicating complementary mediation through ELI [72].

Table 9. Specific indirect effects and mediation results.

H	Path	β (Path Coefficient)	Sample Mean (M)	STDEV	T-Value	*p*-Value	95% BCa CI	Result
H2	ME → ESE → GI	0.043	0.044	0.017	2.502	0.012	[0.011, 0.079]	Supported
H3	ME → ELI → GI	−0.000	0.001	0.025	0.000	1.000	[−0.053, 0.044]	Not supported
H4	ME → ESE → ELI	0.187	0.192	0.030	6.201	<0.001	[0.124, 0.243]	Supported
H5	ME → ESE → ELI → GI	0.106	0.109	0.020	5.274	<0.001	[0.066, 0.144]	Supported
[b]	ESE → ELI → GI	0.332	0.333	0.034	9.617	<0.001	[0.266, 0.401]	Significant

Note: [b] Additional indirect association estimated and reported but not formally hypothesized.

The total associations of mentorship with ESE (β = 0.318, 95% CI [0.220, 0.395], $p < 0.001$), ELI (β = 0.187, 95% CI [0.082, 0.266], $p < 0.001$), and GI (β = 0.169, 95% CI [0.058, 0.257], $p = 0.001$) were positive and statistically significant. The total association of ESE with GI was also positive and statistically significant (β = 0.465, 95% CI [0.376, 0.544], $p < 0.001$). The sequential indirect association (β = 0.106) accounted for about 63% of the total association between mentorship and GI, with the remainder reflecting the

indirect association through ESE alone (β = 0.043) and the non-significant direct association (β = 0.021). In absolute terms, however, the total association between mentorship and GI was small. Figure 3 summarizes the supported and unsupported relationships, highlighting the sequential pathway.

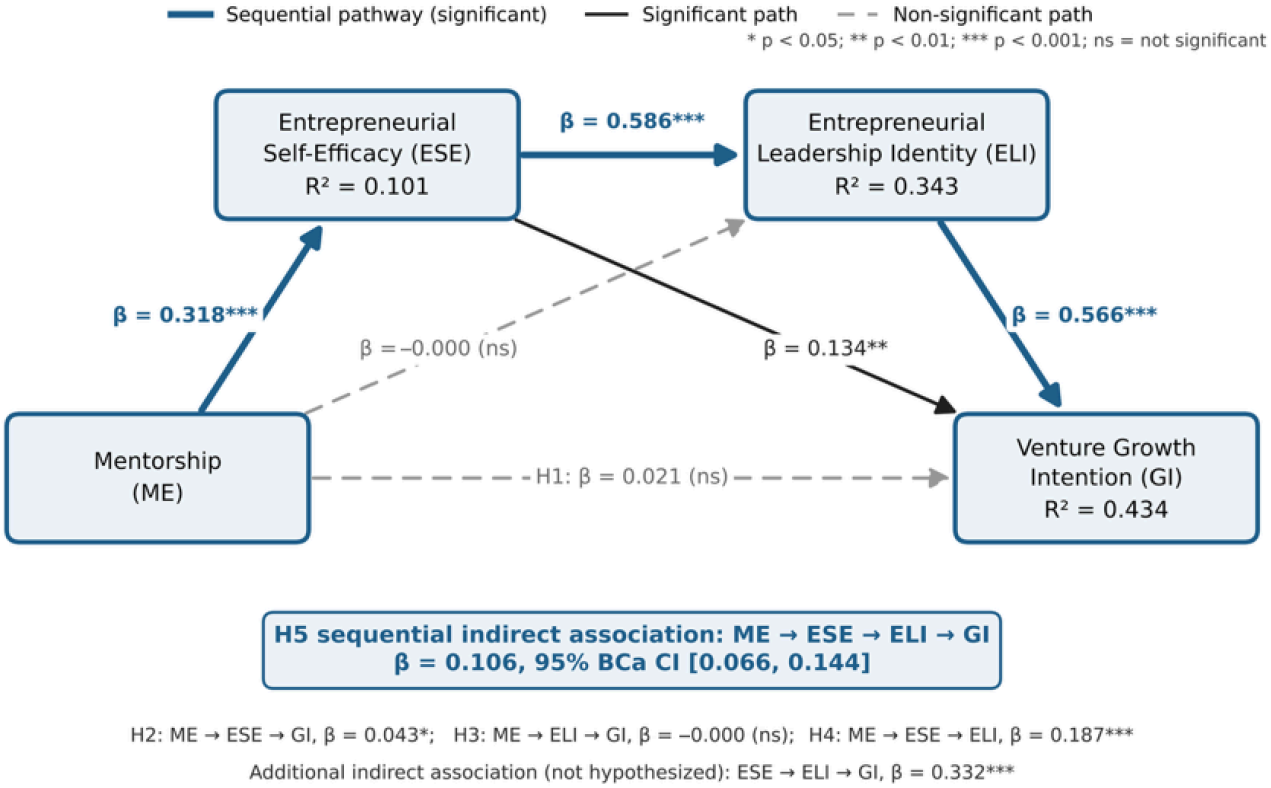


Figure 3. Summary of supported and unsupported relationships. Note. Solid lines indicate significant paths and dashed lines non-significant paths; the highlighted route shows the sequential indirect association tested in H5 (ME → ESE → ELI → GI).

4.5. Gender-Based Multigroup Analysis

Measurement invariance was assessed using the MICOM procedure before comparing the male and female groups. Configural invariance was established for all constructs, indicating that the same model specification and estimation procedures were applied to both groups. Compositional invariance was also established for ELI, ESE, and GI. However, it was not established for ME because its original correlation (c = 0.972) was below the 5% quantile (0.975), with $p = 0.042$. Thus, partial measurement invariance was established for ELI, ESE, and GI, but not for all constructs in the model. Accordingly, substantive interpretation of group differences was restricted to paths among invariant constructs (ESE → ELI, ESE → GI, ELI → GI, and ESE → ELI → GI). Differences in paths involving ME are reported for completeness and treated as descriptive only [78].

Within each group, the direct paths showed the same pattern as in the full sample (Table 10). Mentorship was positively associated with ESE among women (β = 0.356, 95% CI [0.253, 0.441]) and men (β = 0.386, 95% CI [0.189, 0.513]). ESE was positively associated with ELI (women: β = 0.596; men: β = 0.556), and ELI was positively associated with GI (women: β = 0.614; men: β = 0.435). ESE was also positively associated with GI in both groups (women: β = 0.112, 95% CI [0.006, 0.214]; men: β = 0.264, 95% CI [0.061, 0.481]). The direct associations of mentorship with ELI and GI were not significant in either group. Descriptively, the ELI to GI path was stronger among women and the ESE to GI path stronger among men, but neither difference was statistically significant. Confidence

intervals were considerably wider in the male group (for example, ELI → GI: [0.226, 0.631] for men versus [0.516, 0.699] for women), reflecting the smaller male subsample.

Table 10. Gender multigroup analysis.

Effect	Women β [95% BCa CI]	Men β [95% BCa CI]	Difference (Male Minus Female)	1-Tailed *p*	2-Tailed *p*	Conclusion
Direct effect: ELI → GI	0.614 [0.516, 0.699]	0.435 [0.226, 0.631]	−0.178	0.943	0.113	Not significant
Direct effect: ESE → ELI	0.596 [0.492, 0.678]	0.556 [0.397, 0.688]	−0.041	0.677	0.645	Not significant
Direct effect: ESE → GI	0.112 [0.006, 0.214]	0.264 [0.061, 0.481]	0.152	0.104	0.208	Not significant
Direct effect: ME → ELI [a]	−0.026 [−0.129, 0.077]	0.072 [−0.106, 0.215]	0.098	0.156	0.312	Not significant
Direct effect: ME → ESE [a]	0.356 [0.253, 0.441]	0.386 [0.189, 0.513]	0.031	0.366	0.732	Not significant
Direct effect: ME → GI [a]	−0.028 [−0.125, 0.065]	0.091 [−0.109, 0.236]	0.119	0.113	0.226	Not significant
Indirect: ME → ESE → GI [a]			0.062	0.106	0.212	Not significant
Indirect: ME → ELI → GI [a]			−0.037	0.799	0.403	Not significant
Indirect: ME → ESE → ELI [a]			0.003	0.496	0.992	Not significant
Indirect: ESE → ELI → GI			−0.124	0.937	0.126	Not significant
Indirect: ME → ESE → ELI → GI [a]			0.047	0.173	0.346	Not significant
Total indirect: ME → GI [a]			0.073	0.150	0.300	Not significant
Total indirect: ME → ELI [a]			0.003	0.496	0.992	Not significant
Total indirect: ESE → GI			−0.124	0.937	0.126	Not significant

Note: Group-specific coefficients are reported with bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) bootstrap 95% confidence intervals. [a] Involves ME, for which compositional invariance was not established; differences are reported descriptively only.

The PLS-MGA results showed no statistically significant gender differences in the examined direct, specific indirect, or total indirect effects, as all two-tailed *p*-values exceeded the predefined significance level of 0.05 [72] (Table 10). However, comparisons involving mentorship should be regarded as exploratory because compositional invariance was not established for ME [78]. These non-significant differences do not establish equivalence between the male and female groups. An approximate power analysis based on Fisher's z comparison of standardized coefficients indicated that with group sizes of 105 and 280, differences in path coefficients smaller than roughly 0.26 to 0.31 would have less than 80% power to be detected at the 0.05 level [91]. Differences in the size observed here, such as −0.178 for ELI → GI, would therefore be unlikely to reach significance even if real, particularly given the smaller male subsample.

4.6. Sensitivity Analysis: Alternative Ordering of the Mediators

Because cross-sectional data cannot establish temporal order, a rival model was estimated in which the order of the two mediators was reversed (ME → ELI → ESE → GI), with all other paths and estimation settings unchanged. Both models connect the four constructs through all possible paths and therefore reproduce the data equally well. In particular, the paths to GI were virtually unchanged (ELI → GI: β = 0.565; ESE → GI: β = 0.135; ME → GI: β = 0.020), as was the variance explained in GI (R^2 = 0.433, compared with 0.434 in the proposed model). The explained variance in the two mediators shifted as a direct consequence of the reversal: in the rival model, ELI was explained by mentorship alone (R^2 = 0.035), whereas ESE was explained by mentorship and ELI together (R^2 = 0.388). Model fit and explained variance therefore cannot discriminate between the two orderings, and the comparison focuses on the pattern and size of the estimated relationships (Table 11).

Table 11. Comparison of the proposed and rival models.

Relationship	Proposed Model (ME → ESE → ELI → GI)	Rival Model (ME → ELI → ESE → GI)
Path between mediators	ESE → ELI: 0.586 [0.501, 0.653]	ELI → ESE: 0.545 [0.468, 0.615]
ME to first mediator	ME → ESE: 0.318 [0.220, 0.395]	ME → ELI: 0.188 [0.099, 0.282]
ME to second mediator (direct)	ME → ELI: −0.000 [−0.089, 0.080]	ME → ESE: 0.215 [0.134, 0.303]
Full sequential indirect association	0.106 [0.066, 0.144]	0.014 [0.003, 0.030]
Indirect through first mediator only	ME → ESE → GI: 0.043 [0.011, 0.079]	ME → ELI → GI: 0.106 [0.057, 0.161]
Indirect through second mediator only	ME → ELI → GI: −0.000 [−0.053, 0.044]	ME → ESE → GI: 0.029 [0.008, 0.054]
Direct ME → GI	0.021 [−0.071, 0.108]	0.020 [−0.068, 0.111]
Total ME → GI	0.169	0.169 [a]
R^2 ESE	0.101	0.388
R^2 ELI	0.343	0.035
R^2 GI	0.434	0.433

Note: Values are path coefficients with 95% confidence intervals: bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) for the proposed model and percentile for the rival model. [a] Sum of the direct and indirect associations.

In the rival model, ELI was positively associated with ESE (β = 0.545, 95% CI [0.468, 0.615]), and mentorship was positively associated with both ELI (β = 0.188, 95% CI [0.099, 0.282]) and ESE (β = 0.215, 95% CI [0.134, 0.303]). The sequential indirect association through ELI and then ESE was small and only marginally significant (β = 0.014, 95% CI [0.003, 0.030], $p = 0.048$) compared with β = 0.106 for the proposed sequence (H5) because the final link from ESE to GI is weak. Under the rival ordering, most of the association between mentorship and GI ran through ELI alone (β = 0.106, 95% CI [0.057, 0.161]).

Two features of the results are more consistent with the proposed ordering. First, under the proposed ordering, mentorship had no direct association with ELI once ESE was taken into account (β = −0.000), so the association between mentorship and ELI was fully accounted for by ESE. Under the rival ordering, mentorship retained a direct association with ESE alongside its indirect association through ELI, which provides a less parsimonious account. Second, the proposed sequential pathway accounted for a substantially larger share of the total association between mentorship and GI (about 63% compared with about 8%). However, because the two models are statistically equivalent, these results do not establish that ESE precedes ELI. Reciprocal relationships between ESE and ELI could not be tested because PLS-SEM requires recursive models without feedback loops.

5. Discussion

The findings show that mentorship was not significantly directly associated with GI, so H1 was not supported. Instead, mentorship was indirectly associated with GI through ESE (H2) and through the sequential route involving ESE and ELI (H5) (Figure 3). This pattern suggests that mentorship may be related to GI through entrepreneurs' confidence in their capabilities and their identification as entrepreneurial leaders. The results also show that ELI emerged as the strongest direct predictor of GI. At the same time, the total association between mentorship and GI was small (β = 0.169), and mentorship accounted for only about 10% of the variance in ESE. Mentorship should therefore be seen as one of several factors related to entrepreneurs' capability beliefs and growth intentions, rather than a dominant one. However, because all variables were measured at one point in time,

the findings are consistent with the theoretically proposed sequence of associations but do not establish temporal or causal relationships [52].

The results also indicate the relative importance of the relationships in the model. The two links that connect capability beliefs to leadership identity and leadership identity to growth intention were the strongest, with large effect sizes (ESE → ELI: $f^2 = 0.470$; ELI → GI: $f^2 = 0.372$). The link between mentorship and ESE was positive but small ($f^2 = 0.113$), whereas the direct paths from mentorship to ELI and GI, and from ESE to GI, contributed little or nothing ($f^2 = 0.000$ to 0.019). Of the total association between mentorship and GI, about 63% ran through the sequential pathway (H5), about 25% through ESE alone (H2), and the remainder through the non-significant direct path. The sequential pathway is therefore the most important route linking mentorship with growth intention. Within it, the first link, from mentorship to ESE, is the weakest, so the size of the overall association depends mainly on how strongly mentoring is related to capability beliefs.

5.1. Direct Relationships Among Mentorship, Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy, Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity, and Venture Growth Intention

Although only the direct association between mentorship and GI was formally hypothesized, the component paths of the indirect pathways help explain how the hypothesized indirect associations arise and are therefore discussed first. The finding suggests that mentorship is positively associated with ESE, consistent with Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). SCT proposes that efficacy beliefs develop through mastery experiences, observation of others, social persuasion, and interpretations of physiological and emotional states [33]. Mentorship may therefore provide more than entrepreneurial knowledge; through guidance, feedback, encouragement, and exposure to role models, it may strengthen entrepreneurs' confidence in their ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks successfully. This may be particularly important in a fragile context such as Palestine, where entrepreneurs face uncertainty and restricted access to resources. The finding is also consistent with evidence linking mentoring functions and mentor and mentee interactions to ESE [92]. However, mentorship explained only 10.1% of the variance in ESE, indicating that much of the variation in entrepreneurs' capability beliefs remained unexplained by the model. Other factors are likely to be relevant, such as prior entrepreneurial and management experience, education and training, earlier business successes or failures, and exposure to role models outside mentoring relationships [15,47,64]. The association between mentorship and ESE should therefore be read as modest, rather than as evidence that mentorship is a primary source of entrepreneurial confidence.

The strong positive association between ESE and ELI indicates that entrepreneurs with greater confidence in their ability to perform key business tasks tend to identify more strongly as leaders of their ventures. In contrast, entrepreneurs who lack confidence in these abilities may be less likely to identify strongly as entrepreneurial leaders. Thus, confidence in performing entrepreneurial tasks may provide an important foundation for seeing oneself as an entrepreneurial leader. This is consistent with Lord and Hall's [57] explanation of how leadership skills and confidence contribute to the development of a leader identity. An alternative reading is also plausible: entrepreneurs who already see themselves as leaders may come to judge their capabilities more favorably. The association between ESE and ELI was of similar strength in either direction (Section 4.6), so the data alone cannot settle which comes first.

Both ESE and ELI were positively associated with GI, although ELI had the stronger association. The direct contribution of ESE was limited ($f^2 = 0.019$), despite its statistical significance. Entrepreneurs with greater confidence in their ability to solve problems, obtain resources, and manage uncertainty may be more likely to believe that business

growth is achievable [34,85,93]. However, in a fragile context, restricted access to resources and market opportunities may limit how far confidence translates into growth intentions. These contextual factors were not tested in the model. ELI offers an additional explanation. Entrepreneurs who see themselves as leaders responsible for developing their ventures may consider growth part of their role and identity, rather than simply one possible business choice [57]. The strength of this association is comparable to that reported by Dhakal et al. [30] ($\beta = 0.636$) in a different setting, suggesting that the link between leadership identity and growth intention may also hold in a prolonged crisis context. Although ELI and GI were closely related, they remained empirically distinct (Section 4.1). Identifying as a leader concerns who entrepreneurs are, whereas growth intention concerns what they plan to do, and an entrepreneur may identify strongly as a leader while prioritizing stability over expansion [23,27].

The nonsignificant direct associations between mentorship and ELI and GI indicate that no statistically significant direct relationships were detected after accounting for the other predictors in the model; for GI, this means that H1 was not supported. The value of mentorship may depend on the quality and duration of the mentoring relationship, the level of trust between the mentor and entrepreneur, and the type of support provided [94]. The mentorship scale also combined different supportive functions, such as emotional support, encouragement, and practical business advice, which may differ in their relevance to leadership identity and growth intention. In Palestine, mentorship may also concentrate on solving immediate business problems, whereas developing a leader identity may require more time, experience, reflection, and recognition from others. The null direct association with GI is also consistent with St-Jean and Mathieu [31], who found that mentoring does not necessarily encourage more ambitious intentions, because mentors may make novice entrepreneurs more aware of the limitations of their initial projects. In a fragile context, mentors may likewise encourage caution rather than expansion, which could offset any direct positive association with growth intention. Although these explanations were not directly examined, the significant indirect associations are consistent with ESE as a possible link between mentorship, ELI, and GI; they do not establish that changes in ESE occur first.

5.2. Mediation and Sequential Mediation

The mediation results show that ESE plays a central role in the model. Mentorship was indirectly associated with ELI through ESE (H4), while its direct association with ELI was not significant, indicating indirect-only mediation [95]. This pattern is consistent with the proposed role of entrepreneurial confidence in linking mentorship with entrepreneurial leadership identity [16,31].

ELI mediated the association between ESE and GI, an additional indirect association that was not formally hypothesized. Entrepreneurs who were confident in performing business tasks were more likely to see themselves as venture leaders. A stronger leadership identity was then associated with higher growth intention [30,50]. Mentorship was also indirectly associated with GI through ESE (H2). However, the indirect association through ELI alone was not significant (H3). ESE therefore appears to play an important role in linking mentorship with leadership identity and venture growth intention.

The pattern of supported and unsupported hypotheses is informative in its own right. Two of the five hypotheses were not supported. The lack of support for H1 indicates that mentorship was related to growth intention only indirectly: once capability beliefs and leadership identity were taken into account, no direct association remained. The lack of support for H3, together with the non-significant direct path from mentorship to ELI, has a more specific implication. Section 2.4 argued that mentors may shape leadership identity directly, by acting as a community of practice and providing exemplars and validation [41,57]. This

argument was not supported in this sample: mentorship was related to leadership identity only through capability beliefs (H4). Yet the sequential route through ESE and then ELI was significant and accounted for about 63% of the total association between mentorship and GI. Rather than weakening the model, the unsupported hypotheses help identify the pathway most consistent with the data: mentorship appears to be related to leadership identity, and through it to growth intention, only insofar as it is associated with stronger capability beliefs. This suggests that leadership identity may not be readily conveyed through advice or role modeling alone, but may be anchored in entrepreneurs' confidence in their own task performance. The unsupported hypotheses therefore refine, rather than undermine, the theoretical explanation: they point to a single dominant route from mentorship to growth intention, rather than several parallel ones.

The significant sequential indirect association links all four constructs. The S–O–R framework connects external stimuli with responses through internal organismic states [37,38]. In this study, H5 positions mentorship as the external stimulus, ESE and ELI as the proposed successive internal cognitive and identity states, and GI as the intended behavioral response. A similar S-O-O-R structure was used by Duong [59], although that study examined different constructs. SCT explains the association between mentorship and efficacy beliefs. Identity Theory explains how these beliefs relate to how entrepreneurs see themselves as venture leaders, which may contribute to stronger venture growth intention [32,46,50,57]. The value of combining the three perspectives lies in this division of labor: neither SCT nor Identity Theory alone specifies a two-stage internal process, and S–O–R alone does not explain why each link should exist.

However, the cross-sectional findings do not establish this sequence: stronger leadership identity could also reinforce ESE, and the two may develop reciprocally. The sensitivity analysis is informative here (Section 4.6). When the order of the mediators was reversed, the two models explained GI equally well, but the reversed sequential route was much weaker ($\beta = 0.014$ compared with 0.106), and mentorship then required a direct association with ESE in addition to its indirect association through ELI. Under the proposed ordering, in contrast, mentorship had no direct association with ELI once ESE was considered. The data are therefore more consistent with the proposed ordering, but because the two models are statistically equivalent, this remains a matter of theoretical plausibility rather than empirical demonstration.

5.3. Gender and Contextual Considerations

The gender analysis found no significant differences in the relationships that could be compared. These nonsignificant findings do not establish that the relationships are equivalent across genders, particularly given the unequal group sizes, the baseline differences between the groups in age, sector, and employment status (Section 3.4), and the limited power to detect differences smaller than about 0.26 to 0.31 (Section 4.5). Within each group, the same paths were significant. Descriptively, the association between ELI and GI was stronger among women ($\beta = 0.614$) than among men ($\beta = 0.435$), whereas the association between ESE and GI was stronger among men ($\beta = 0.264$ compared with 0.112). If confirmed in larger and more balanced samples, this pattern would suggest that women's growth intentions may be more closely tied to whether they see themselves as entrepreneurial leaders, consistent with research on the gendered nature of leadership identity [15,24]. Gender differences in ESE may also involve how accurately entrepreneurs calibrate their confidence to their actual capabilities, rather than only how confident they are [71], which mean-level comparisons cannot capture. This does not mean that male and female entrepreneurs face the same conditions. Gender inequalities may appear in access to finance, networks, mobility, and other resources rather than in the relationships examined

in this study [27,96]. However, compositional invariance was not established for ME, limiting the comparability of all direct and indirect relationships involving mentorship. These comparisons therefore cannot support conclusions about gender similarities or differences in mentorship-related relationships [80].

Several features of the Palestinian context may help explain the pattern of results and suggest how it might differ elsewhere. Support programs in Palestine have often been short-term, donor-funded, and focused on starting businesses rather than growing them, and many have selected beneficiaries on the basis of vulnerability rather than growth potential [11,14,25]. Mentoring received in such programs may emphasize survival and immediate problem-solving, which could explain why it was related to capability beliefs but not directly to leadership identity or growth intention. Movement restrictions, fragmented markets, and political uncertainty [12,14,25] may also limit the extent to which confidence translates into plans for expansion, consistent with the small direct association between ESE and GI. In addition, many respondents, particularly women, operated home-based, agricultural, or sole-proprietor businesses, often alongside other employment (Table 1), where growth may not be a central goal [23,27]. In more stable institutional environments, where mentoring is more often linked to accelerators, finance, and market access [54], mentorship may show stronger direct associations with growth intention and explain a larger share of the variance in ESE. Comparative research is needed to test these possibilities.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings bring together Social Cognitive Theory and Identity Theory by suggesting that ESE and ELI may help explain the association between mentorship and growth intention. ESE provides a possible cognitive link between mentorship and ELI, while ELI provides a possible identity-based link between ESE and GI. The significant sequential indirect association (H5) is consistent with the theoretically proposed ordering, which the S–O–R framework organizes with mentorship represented as the stimulus, ESE and ELI as successive organismic factors, and GI as the response. This interpretation suggests that external support may be associated with growth intention through entrepreneurs' confidence in their abilities and their sense of themselves as venture leaders, without establishing the temporal order of these relationships.

Four further theoretical implications follow. First, leadership identity was not directly associated with mentorship but was strongly associated with capability beliefs, which refines identity-based accounts of how mentors shape novices' self-views [41]. In this sample, mentoring was related to leadership identity only through confidence in task performance. Second, the stronger association of GI with ELI than with ESE suggests that growth intention may be anchored more in role identity than in task confidence alone, extending identity-based explanations of growth intention [30] to a prolonged crisis setting. Third, the modest share of variance in ESE associated with mentorship cautions against treating mentoring as the main route to entrepreneurial self-efficacy, consistent with SCT's view that efficacy beliefs draw on several sources [32]. Fourth, the results suggest that models linking mentorship with growth intention may be most informative when built around a sequential pathway from capability beliefs to leadership identity, rather than around several parallel direct and indirect routes. Because the direct paths from mentorship contributed little, future theorizing may give greater weight to the conditions under which mentoring is associated with capability beliefs, the weakest link in the sequence.

From a practical perspective, entrepreneurship-support organizations could complement measures of participation, such as mentoring sessions or training hours, with assessments of entrepreneurs' capability beliefs and leadership identity. Mentoring programs could combine technical advice with practical problem-solving, discussions of setbacks,

role modeling, and opportunities to make and review business decisions. These are possible program directions informed by the findings, rather than interventions whose effectiveness was tested in this study.

Mentors could support entrepreneurs in finding their own solutions rather than simply telling them what to do. They can do this through open-ended questions, careful listening, useful feedback, and discussing possible solutions together. This can help entrepreneurs compare their options and make their own decisions [97]. Mentoring programs could also provide or facilitate access to other services, such as training programs in financial literacy, access to finance, access to new markets, and support suited to their stage of business development [17,26]. Such support recognizes that confidence and leadership identity alone may be insufficient when entrepreneurs face substantial resources and market constraints.

Programs could support women not only in starting businesses but also as their businesses grow. This may include better access to finance, markets, and business networks [27,96]. Flexible mentoring may also help women with family responsibilities or movement restrictions [17]. These recommendations reflect barriers discussed in the literature, rather than gender differences established by the present analysis. Support should be tailored to entrepreneurs' individual needs, including opportunities to strengthen confidence in business tasks and develop their entrepreneurial leadership identity.

From a sustainability perspective, these recommendations concern support for livelihoods and inclusive economic participation, which relate most directly to the economic and social dimensions of sustainability, including SDG Targets 8.3, 8.5, and 5.5 [7]. Their contribution to sustained employment, inclusion, or environmentally responsible growth would require evaluation beyond the growth intentions measured in this study.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study has five main limitations that also provide directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design cannot confirm the temporal or causal order proposed in the mediation model. Alternative explanations, including ELI preceding ESE, reciprocal relationships, and unmeasured factors, cannot be excluded. The sensitivity analysis could compare only recursive orderings, because PLS-SEM cannot estimate reciprocal relationships, and the two orderings were statistically equivalent. Future research could use longitudinal panel designs with at least three waves, such as cross-lagged panel models, to examine whether changes in ESE precede changes in ELI, the reverse, or both. In addition, because the relative importance of the pathways was identified in the same sample used to test them, future studies should test a more parsimonious specification centered on the sequential pathway in independent samples, to establish whether the pattern observed here is replicated.

Second, GI is a useful measure because it captures entrepreneurs' plans to pursue future growth, but intention does not always lead to action [98,99]. Future research should follow entrepreneurs over time and examine whether mentorship, ESE, and ELI predict later changes in GI and actual growth. GI could be combined with changes in sales, employment, investment, market reach, and product development. This would connect growth intention with realized business outcomes. The model also omitted resource and opportunity factors, such as access to finance, market access, and mobility restrictions, which may account for much of the unexplained variance in ESE and GI. Future studies could include these factors as predictors or moderators to examine when capability beliefs and leadership identity translate into growth intentions.

Third, all constructs were measured through one self-report survey. This may increase the risk of common method variance and socially desirable responses [88]. Procedural safeguards and statistical diagnostics cannot rule out these biases, and respondents' desire

to provide consistent answers may contribute to the observed associations. Future research should use data from several sources, including mentors, program records, and business-performance data.

Fourth, the mentorship scale captured reported mentoring experiences but did not distinguish sustained relationships from occasional support or specify a fixed reference period, duration, delivery mode, contact intensity, or program context. Some respondents reporting no mentorship nevertheless reported specific mentoring experiences, indicating possible differences in how mentorship was understood. Future research should clarify these distinctions, for example, by separating intensive personal mentoring from ad hoc support [54], and examine which mentoring functions are most strongly associated with ESE, ELI, and GI.

Fifth, purposive non-probability sampling through entrepreneurship-support networks may have overrepresented entrepreneurs connected to these organizations and underrepresented those with limited access to support. The sample covered the West Bank and East Jerusalem but excluded Gaza because of the crisis following October 2023. The findings should not be generalized to all Palestinian entrepreneurs or other fragile settings without further evidence. The unequal gender-group sizes and differences in the respondents' demographic and business characteristics also limit the interpretation of gender comparisons. The smaller male sample may reduce precision and statistical power, so nonsignificant differences do not establish equivalence. Compositional invariance was not established for ME, preventing firm conclusions about gender differences or similarities in relationships involving mentorship. Future research should test the model in other locations, sectors, and fragile contexts, and comparative studies across institutional environments, including fragile and more stable settings, could show whether the sequential pathway depends on context. Larger and more balanced male and female samples, with analyses accounting for differences in group characteristics, are also needed to refine the mentorship measure and examine whether the relationships differ according to gender, business stage, and access to resources.

8. Conclusions

This study examined how mentorship is associated with venture growth intention among entrepreneurs owning or managing micro and small enterprises in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In response to the first research question, the findings indicate that mentorship had no statistically significant direct association with GI (H1 not supported) but showed a small, significant total association with it. In response to the second research question, this association ran through ESE (H2), and sequentially through ESE and ELI (H5), with the sequential route accounting for most of the total association. Mentorship was also indirectly associated with ELI through ESE (H4), but not with GI through ELI alone (H3). ELI was the strongest direct predictor of GI, highlighting the importance of how entrepreneurs understand their role as venture leaders. In response to the third research question, no statistically significant gender differences were detected, although limited statistical power, unequal group sizes, and the lack of compositional invariance for mentorship mean that this result does not establish equivalence between women and men.

The main contribution of the study lies in the sequential pathway. Mentorship was related to leadership identity, and through it to growth intention, only through capability beliefs, and this ordering was more consistent with the data than its reverse, although the two could not be distinguished statistically. By integrating Social Cognitive Theory and Identity Theory within the S–O–R framework, the study offers a more specific account of how external support may relate to growth intention in a prolonged fragile context.

Overall, the study highlights capability beliefs and entrepreneurial leadership identity as relevant factors for understanding how mentorship relates to growth intention in a fragile context. These findings may inform entrepreneurship-support programs, although they do not demonstrate that mentoring interventions increase growth intention or actual business growth. Nor do they establish whether growth intentions translate into sustainable business outcomes. The findings represent associations because the cross-sectional design cannot establish which factor came first or prove causality. They are also based on a purposive sample of entrepreneurs reached through support networks, self-reported measures, and a mentorship scale that did not capture the form or intensity of mentoring. Longitudinal, multi-source, and comparative research is needed to determine whether the sequential pathway identified here holds over time and across institutional settings.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Measurement items, response scales, and sources.

Code	Item Wording
Mentorship (ME)	Response scale: 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always. Source: Baluku, Matagi, et al. [15]
ME1	Someone has encouraged me to discuss how I feel about my ability to succeed in self-employment.
ME2	Someone has encouraged me to discuss with him or her my honest feelings and business experiences.
ME3	Someone has helped me to explore realistic ways for achieving my business objectives.
ME4	I have been provided with practical suggestions for succeeding in business.
ME5	Someone has expressed his or her own confidence in my ability to succeed in business.
ME6	Someone has used his or her own personal experience to explain how I can achieve career and financial success in business.
ME7	Someone has guided me to explore my personal strengths that can be useful in doing business.
ME8	In interactions with mentors and role models, I have been offered recommendations on how to improve my business acumen.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Code	Item Wording
ME9	I have been guided on how to assess business opportunities.
ME10	I have had help developing better coping strategies when I have not achieved my business goals.
Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE)	Response scale: 1 = Completely unsure; 2 = Somewhat unsure; 3 = Neither sure nor unsure; 4 = Somewhat sure; 5 = Completely sure. Source: Chen et al. [81]
Marketing	
ESE1	I can set and meet market share goals.
ESE2	I can set and meet sales goals.
ESE3	I can set and attain profit goals.
ESE4	I can establish a position in the product market.
ESE5	I can conduct market analysis.
ESE6	I can expand the business.
Innovation	
ESE7	I can develop new ventures and new ideas.
ESE8	I can develop new products and services.
ESE9	I can reach new markets and geographic territories.
ESE10	I can develop new methods of production, marketing, and management.
Management	
ESE11	I can reduce risk and uncertainty.
ESE12	I can carry out strategic planning and develop an information system.
ESE13	I can manage time by setting goals.
ESE14	I can establish and achieve goals and objectives.
ESE15	I can define organizational roles, responsibilities, and policies.
Risk-taking	
ESE16	I can take calculated risks.
ESE17	I can make decisions under uncertainty and risk.
ESE18	I can take responsibility for ideas and decisions.
ESE19	I can work under pressure and conflict.
Financial control	
ESE20	I can perform financial analysis.
ESE21	I can develop a financial system and internal controls.
ESE22	I can control costs.
Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity (ELI)	Response scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree. Source: Dhakal et al. [23]
ELI1	Developing and nurturing a venture/business is an important part of who I am.
ELI2	I think of myself as an entrepreneur.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Code	Item Wording
ELI3	I think of myself as a leader.
ELI4	When I describe myself, I would include the word leader.
Venture Growth Intention (GI)	Response scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree. Source: Kolvereid and Åmo [83]
GI1	I consciously engage in new assignments in order to grow my business.
GI2	I put emphasis on achieving as much business growth as possible.
GI3	I want to grow my business fast.

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