Acta Commercii - Independent Research Journal in the Management Sciences
ISSN: (Online) 1684-1999, (Print) 2413-1903

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Stepping ahead, entrepreneurial competencies in the transition from intention to action

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Authors:
Nompumelelo Khumalo[1]
Steven Zwane[1]
Anastacia Mamabolo[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Steven Zwane,
zwanes@gibs.co.za

Dates:
Received: 25 Jan. 2026
Accepted: 02 June 2026
Published: 03 July 2026

How to cite this article:
Khumalo, N., Zwane, S. & Mamabolo, A., 2026, 'Stepping ahead, entrepreneurial competencies in the transition from intention to action', *Acta Commercii* 26(1), a1572. https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v26i1.1572

Orientation: Entrepreneurial intention is widely researched, yet less is known about how young people convert entrepreneurial intention into action in developing-country contexts.

Research purpose: Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Rubicon and action-phase perspective, this study explores how entrepreneurial competencies shape the transition from intention to action.

Motivation for the study: Entrepreneurship training can stimulate intention, but intention alone does not explain why some individuals act, others delay and others exit or revert to intention. This study, therefore, examines how competencies developed through training and lived entrepreneurial exposure shape the post-intention transition.

Research design, approach and method: A qualitative study was conducted with 25 South African youth who had participated in entrepreneurship training. Semi-structured interviews were analysed through a hybrid thematic approach using TPB sensitising concepts and inductive theme development.

Main findings: Four competencies shaped transition: (1) entrepreneurial mindset, (2) connectedness, (3) psychosocial resilience and (4) entrepreneurial agency. Mindset and connectedness supported opportunity recognition and mobilisation, while resilience and agency became critical when fear, social pressure, uncertainty and institutional constraints emerged. The study identifies entrepreneurial thrill as energising excitement towards action and entrepreneurial dipping as loss of confidence, motivation or momentum.

Practical/managerial implications: Entrepreneurship programmes should support post-intention transition by mapping competencies to phase-specific challenges.

Contribution/value-add: The study theorises the intention-action transition as a competence-emotion process producing full venture enactment, partial engagement, exit or reversion to intention.

Keywords: entrepreneurial action; entrepreneurial competencies; entrepreneurial intention; entrepreneurial phase; Theory of Planned Behaviour; developing-country context.

Introduction

Entrepreneurial intention, defined as a commitment to create a new firm (McMullen & Shepherd 2006; Shirokova, Osiyevskyy & Bogatyreva 2016), is a well-researched aspect of entrepreneurial activity (Batista-Canino, Santana-Hernández & Medina-Brito 2024). Various factors influence and motivate individuals to start businesses, including entrepreneurship education (Bae et al. 2014), skills (Roos & Botha 2022), social context (Krueger, Reilly & Carsrud 2000; Meoli et al. 2020) and perceived feasibility and desirability (Shirokova et al. 2016). However, although intention is an important antecedent of entrepreneurial behaviour, only a small proportion of individuals translate entrepreneurial intention into action (Oliveira & Rua 2018). This gap is especially relevant in South Africa, where youth unemployment and low early-stage entrepreneurial activity intensify the need to understand how entrepreneurial aspirations become action (Bowmaker-Falconer, Meyer & Samsami 2023).

This study positions the intention-action gap as a post-intention transition problem. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has been widely used in entrepreneurship research to explain how attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control shape entrepreneurial intention (Ajzen 1991). However, there is still limited understanding of how intentioned potential entrepreneurs move into action, delay, exit or re-enter the intention stage (Lihua 2022). Acknowledging these theoretical limitations, the Rubicon and action-phase perspective complements TPB by focusing attention on the movement from pre-decision intention to post-decision, pre-action and action phases (Brandstätter et al. 2003; Delanoë-Gueguen & Fayolle 2019). We therefore use TPB as the theory of intention formation and the Rubicon and action-phase model as the lens for understanding post-intention movement towards entrepreneurial action.

Our interest is in the entrepreneurial competencies required during this transition. Research on entrepreneurial competencies tends to be generic and often does not specify which competencies matter at different entrepreneurial phases (Marvel, Davis & Sproul 2016). Limited research has examined competencies such as opportunity recognition and value creation in explaining early entrepreneurial action (Carruthers, Venter & Botha 2019; González-López et al. 2021). We argue that competencies should be understood as transition resources: they do not merely describe what entrepreneurs possess but explain how individuals cross, stall within or retreat from the intention-action threshold.

We further argue that the transition is not only cognitive or behavioural but also emotional (Grichnik, Smeja & Welpe 2010). Entrepreneurial action involves uncertainty, social judgement, limited resources and changing perceptions of feasibility (Duong 2022; Frese & Gielnik 2023). Consequently, emotions may accelerate or interrupt the transition from opportunity evaluation to opportunity exploitation (Grichnik et al. 2010). We therefore examine how competencies required for the intention-action transition interact with entrepreneurial thrill, which energises action, and entrepreneurial dipping, which interrupts momentum when contextual or psychological barriers become salient.

The study investigates the entrepreneurial competencies required for transitioning from intention to action among South African youth who underwent entrepreneurship training. To understand divergent transition outcomes, the study includes individuals who started businesses, those who engaged partially through side-hustling, those who exited entrepreneurial action and those who retained entrepreneurial intention without action. The focus is not on evaluating a standardised training intervention, but on understanding how trained youth interpret and navigate the post-intention transition.

This study makes three contributions. Firstly, it identifies four competencies that shape the transition from intention to action: (1) entrepreneurial mindset, (2) connectedness, (3) psychosocial resilience and (4) entrepreneurial agency. Secondly, it extends TPB by showing how these competencies translate attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control into action or non-action. Thirdly, it theorises the transition as a competence-emotion process in which entrepreneurial thrill and entrepreneurial dipping shape divergent outcomes: full venture enactment, partial engagement, exit and reversion to intention. These contributions will also inform the development of entrepreneurship training programmes in the future.

Literature review

Entrepreneurial intention

Entrepreneurial intention is a widely researched topic among entrepreneurship scholars and practitioners, and it has often been used as a proxy for entrepreneurial action (Meoli et al. 2020). According to McMullen and Shepherd (2006), intention is a combination of beliefs and desires, 'Knowledge influences beliefs about what to do, while motivation drives one's desire to act'. Intentions are commonly studied through the TPB, which remains a primary conceptual framework for examining entrepreneurial intention (Batista-Canino et al. 2024; Meoli et al. 2020).

Theory of Planned Behaviour suggests that intention is influenced by three antecedents: (1) attitudes toward the behaviour, (2) subjective norms and (3) perceived behavioural control (Shirokova et al. 2016). In entrepreneurship, attitudes capture whether entrepreneurship is perceived as desirable or valuable; subjective norms capture social support, pressure or scepticism from family, peers, mentors and communities and perceived behavioural control captures the individual's confidence in their capacity to start and sustain a venture. These constructs are useful for explaining intention formation, but they are less complete in explaining why intention may not become action.

Entrepreneurial action

Entrepreneurial action refers to the range of activities individuals engage in when creating or developing a venture (Duong 2022). It includes generating ideas, testing concepts, developing products or services, mobilising resources, negotiating with stakeholders, building prototypes, acquiring customers and initiating new ventures (Ripolles & Blesa 2023). Although action does not originate outside intention, intention does not automatically result in action (Gieure, Del Mar Benavides-Espinosa & Roig-Dobón 2020; Shaver 2012; Shirokova et al. 2016).

Entrepreneurial action can also be understood through the Rubicon model, which differentiates pre-decision, post-decision and pre-action, action and post-action phases (Brandstätter et al. 2003; Delanoë-Gueguen & Fayolle 2019). This model is useful because it places the present study in the post-intention zone, where individuals have moved beyond general desirability but must still mobilise resources, manage fear, make decisions and enact concrete entrepreneurial behaviour. Recent action-process work similarly emphasises that entrepreneurial action unfolds over time and under uncertainty rather than as a single discrete event (Dlamini & Botha 2023; Frese & Gielnik 2023; Wood, Bakker & Fisher 2021).

Entrepreneurial intention to action transition

Forming intentions and planning to start a business are not sufficient to make one an entrepreneur (McMullen & Shepherd 2006). Roos and Botha (2022) imply that entrepreneurial intentions screen individuals who plan to be entrepreneurs from those who are not interested in pursuing entrepreneurship. Yet behavioural intentions explain only part of the variance in behaviour (Shirokova et al. 2016), which means the post-intention transition requires additional explanation. One explanation is that entrepreneurial action is dynamic, uncertain and temporally extended (Wood et al. 2021).

Across a variety of studies on entrepreneurial intention and action, it was identified that a fraction of the people who desire to become entrepreneurs are unable to bridge the gap between intention and action (Ripolles & Blesa 2023; Shirokova et al. 2016). Van Gelderen et al. (2018) stated that of the 422 participants who had some level of intention, only 30% took no action and 16% had businesses that were fully operational or closed down. This study revealed that implementation plans, which specify when, where and how actions will be taken, play a crucial role in translating entrepreneurial intention into action (Van Gelderen et al. 2018). Previous studies on the intention-action gap have increased the relevance of research that focuses exclusively on entrepreneurial intentions. These studies further queried the degree to which the factors influence whether the intention will transform into an effective action, but such research is deficient (Lihua 2022).

Competencies and intention-action transition

Man, Lau and Chan (2002) define entrepreneurial competencies as higher-level characteristics encompassing traits, skills and knowledge that enable an entrepreneur to perform a job role successfully. These competencies include opportunity, relationship, conceptual, organising, strategic and commitment competencies (Man, Lau & Snape 2008), as well as self-knowledge, perseverance, decisiveness and networking (Kyndt & Baert 2015). Competencies are not themselves entrepreneurial activities; rather, they are the means through which entrepreneurs execute activities (Mitchelmore & Rowley 2010).

From a process perspective, possessing competencies does not automatically make an individual entrepreneurially competent. Competence becomes visible when an individual applies knowledge, skills and attitudes to initiate or sustain venture-related action. Existing research has linked competencies to early nascent entrepreneurship and venture creation (Carruthers et al. 2019; González-López et al. 2021), but less is known about how competencies operate specifically at the threshold between intention and action. This study, therefore, conceptualises competencies as phase-specific transition resources.

Entrepreneurship education and training are widely recognised as important for strengthening entrepreneurial attitudes, self-efficacy and intention (Al-Qadasi et al. 2024; Bae et al. 2014; Ripolles & Blesa 2023). Competencies can also be developed through structured training, experiential learning and repeated exposure to entrepreneurial tasks. In this study, we distinguish between entrepreneurship training and entrepreneurial training. Entrepreneurship training refers to structured learning about venture creation, including business planning, finance, marketing, opportunity identification and business management. Entrepreneurial training is broader and focuses on cultivating mindset, agency, resilience, initiative, opportunity orientation and the ability to act under uncertainty. This distinction matters because participants were not only exposed to business knowledge but also exposed to developmental activities intended to build confidence, problem-solving, networking and entrepreneurial self-belief. Accordingly, training is treated as a developmental context through which entrepreneurial competencies may be cultivated, rather than as a standardised intervention that automatically causes entrepreneurial action.

Integrating Theory of Planned Behaviour, action phases, competencies and emotions

This study integrates TPB and the Rubicon and action-phase perspective into a single explanatory chain. Theory of Planned Behaviour explains the formation of entrepreneurial intention through attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen 1991). The Rubicon and action-phase model explains movement from intention to pre-action, action and post-action evaluation (Brandstätter et al. 2003; Delanoë-Gueguen & Fayolle 2019). Entrepreneurial competencies explain what enables or constrains this movement, while emotions explain why momentum may accelerate, stall, exit or revert. In line with the emotions literature, affective states such as joy and fear can influence how entrepreneurs evaluate and exploit opportunities (Grichnik et al. 2010).

Within this chain, existing entrepreneurial competency categories can be linked to TPB at a generic level. Opportunity and conceptual competencies help individuals evaluate the desirability, feasibility and value of potential venture ideas and therefore connect to attitudes toward entrepreneurship. Relationship and networking competencies connect to subjective norms because they shape access to social approval, role models, legitimacy, information and resources. Organising, strategic and commitment competencies connect to perceived behavioural control because they strengthen the individual's capacity to plan, mobilise resources, persist and act under uncertainty. Taken together, TPB, action-phase logic, competency theory and the emotions literature provide a conceptual basis for examining how entrepreneurial intention may, or may not, become entrepreneurial action.

Research methods and design

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore entrepreneurial competencies in the intention-action transition. A qualitative approach is appropriate for explaining entrepreneurs' practical experiences, sensemaking processes and interactions within specific contexts (Hlady-Rispal, Fayolle & Gartner 2021; Van Burg et al. 2022). The unit of analysis was the individual, with attention given to youth who transitioned into entrepreneurship, those who engaged partially, those who exited and those who retained intention without venture enactment.

The study focused on youth who had participated in entrepreneurship training. Prior training was used as a purposive sampling criterion because it indicated exposure to entrepreneurship as a possible career pathway and enabled the study to examine individuals who had formed or had previously formed entrepreneurial intention. The study does not treat the training programmes as a standardised intervention and does not claim to measure their causal effect. This clarification is important because participants attended different programmes across different years and providers. The programmes are therefore treated as contextual exposure rather than as a controlled intervention.

At the time of the interviews, participants were required to fall within the South African youth age category. The retained dataset included 25 participants in different stages of their entrepreneurial journeys. Available demographic descriptors are reported in Table 1. The dataset contains gender, year of training, current category and transition outcome.

The training years ranged from 2008 to 2023. This 15-year spread was retained because the study seeks to understand transition pathways rather than immediate programme outcomes. Entrepreneurial scholars recommend evaluating after a prolonged period following the attainment of training, because intentions to act take time to materialise (Joensuu-Salo, Viljamaa & Varamäki 2020). The spread allowed the analysis to include recent intention, early action, side-hustling, full venture enactment, exit and reversion. However, the difference in time since training may shape participants' opportunities to act, fail, re-enter or reinterpret their entrepreneurial journeys. Time since training is therefore treated as a contextual factor and acknowledged as a limitation rather than ignored.

Participants attended youth entrepreneurship or enterprise-development programmes delivered by non-governmental organisations, private-sector partners or youth-development platforms. Although these programmes differed in duration, pedagogy and provider, they shared a broad entrepreneurship-development orientation: exposing participants to entrepreneurship as a career option, opportunity identification, business skills, confidence building, networking, mentorship and/or venture development. The study's premise is therefore not that all participants received identical training, but that they had sufficient exposure to entrepreneurship to reflect meaningfully on the transition from intention to action.

Data gathering process

The interview guide began with general questions to understand participants' entrepreneurial journeys, followed by questions on training exposure, intention, entrepreneurial activity, barriers, enablers, competencies, social support, fear, resource access and future orientation. These areas were informed by TPB sensitising concepts: (1) attitudes towards entrepreneurship, (2) subjective norms and (3) perceived behavioural control. The semi-structured format allowed reciprocal interaction between participant and interviewer and enabled follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Kallio et al. 2016). Interviews were conducted online and in person, lasted between 45 min and 1 h and were conducted from September 2024 to July 2025.

Before data collection commenced, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Permission to record interviews was requested at the start of each interview. Written consent was obtained for in-person interviews and verbal consent for online interviews where written consent was difficult to obtain. All participants were older than 18 years and could consent to participate.

Data analysis approach

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). The analysis followed a hybrid logic. Firstly, deductive sensitising concepts were drawn from TPB, particularly attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, and from intention-action literature on fear, self-regulation, action uncertainty and implementation intentions. These concepts guided attention to how participants described the desirability of entrepreneurship, social encouragement or pressure, perceived capability, fear, resource constraints and action-taking.

Secondly, inductive coding was used to identify patterns emerging from participants' accounts. Codes were grouped into categories and then into themes. Through this process, four competency themes were developed: (1) entrepreneurial mindset, (2) entrepreneurial connectedness, (3) psychosocial resilience and (4) entrepreneurial agency. This hybrid approach allowed the analysis to remain theoretically informed while preserving the inductive richness of participants' experiences. Interview data were supplemented by open-forum data in which participants shared their entrepreneurial journeys, thereby strengthening triangulation and trustworthiness.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the GIBS MBA Research Ethical Clearance Committee, Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, on 26 August 2024. No ethics approval number was supplied on the approval letter.

TABLE 1: Participant profile and transition status.

Participant	Gender	Training year	Age (years)	Education	Geography	Years since training (2025)	Current category	Transition outcome
P1	Female	2017	24	Politics, Philosophy and Economics studies	Johannesburg	8	Construction entrepreneur	Full venture enactment
P2	Female	2018	23	Science graduate	Johannesburg	7	Exited aspiring farming entrepreneur	Exit or reversion
P3	Male	2022	19	Creative and/or photography student	Johannesburg	3	Student; photography side-hustler	Partial or side-hustle
P4	Female	2017	24	International relations; business admin; EMS certificate	Johannesburg	8	Cosmetics entrepreneur	Partial or side-hustle
P5	Male	2012	29	Law studies; prior accounting studies	Johannesburg	13	Employed; techno-entrepreneur	Partial or full venture enactment
P6	Female	2016	25	Commerce graduate	Thembisa	9	Marketing Intern or Property	Full venture enactment
P7	Female	2023	19	Matric; Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) N5 (National Accredited Technical Education Diploma) studies	Soweto	2	Property entrepreneur	Full venture enactment
P8	Male	2012	29	Commerce graduate	Pretoria	13	Cybersecurity Consultant	Full venture enactment
P9	Female	2015	26	Commerce graduate	Johannesburg	10	Teacher assistant	Intention or no venture
P10	Female	2023	19	Computer course and/or JASA exposure	Gauteng	2	Job seeking	Intention or no venture
P11	Female	2023	19	Matric; computer studies	Gauteng	2	Programme delivery	Exit or reversion
P12	Female	2018	23	Public relations and communication	Soweto	7	Employed	Intention or no venture
P13	Female	2019	23	Law student	Soweto	6	Student and part-time facilitator	Intention maintained or partial engagement
P14	Male	2018	23	Web development diploma	Midrand	7	Web developer and aspiring entrepreneur	Intention or no venture
P15	Male	2014	27	Software development; former tutor	Johannesburg	11	Serial entrepreneur	Full action or re-entry
P16	Male	2009	32	Business Administration student	Johannesburg	16	Corporate professional; youth consultant	Partial or consulting
P17	Male	2012	30	Commerce graduate	Pretoria	13	Cybersecurity consultant	Full venture enactment
P18	Female	2012	29	Marketing graduate	Johannesburg	13	Product manager; startup founder	Partial or startup
P19	Female	2012	30	Marketing graduate	Johannesburg	13	Marketing manager; consultant	Partial or consulting
P20	Female	2017	24	Commerce graduate	Johannesburg	8	Marketing coordinator; entrepreneur	Partial action
P21	Female	2010	31	Masters in Engineering	Midrand	15	Project manager; side-hustler	Partial or side-hustle
P22	Male	2023	18	University student	Midrand	2	Student; young entrepreneur	Partial or full early action
P23	Female	2017	24	BCom Marketing and Business Management	Johannesburg	8	Digital marketing entrepreneur	Full venture enactment
P24	Female	2016	25	BA Development Studies; BEd	Soweto	9	Educator; former beauty hustler	Exit or reversion
P25	Male	2008	33	Masters in Commerce	Midrand	17	Bank administrator; former barber	Exit or reversion

EMS, Entrepreneurship and Management Skills; JASA, Junior Achievement South Africa; BCom, Bachelor of Commerce; BA, Bachelor of Arts; BEd, Bachelor of Education; MBA, Master of Business Administration.

Note: Participant demographic information was consolidated from the interview transcripts, the MBA thesis dataset and the supplementary alumni dataset. To preserve anonymity, geographic information is reported at province, city or township level only. 'Approx. years since training' was calculated as 2025 minus the training year. 'Transition outcome' refers to the participant's movement from entrepreneurial intention into full venture action, partial or side-hustle action, exit or reversion to intention.

Results

This study explored entrepreneurial competencies required to transition from intention to action. The findings revealed four competencies: (1) entrepreneurial mindset, (2) connectedness, (3) psychosocial resilience and (4) agency. These competencies were associated with two emotional states in the intention-action transition: (1) entrepreneurial thrill and (2) entrepreneurial dipping. The findings also show that competencies did not operate in isolation or with equal strength across participants. Mindset and connectedness appeared among both transitioners and non-transitioners, suggesting that they are important but not sufficient on their own. The differentiating pattern was that transitioners were more likely to mobilise networks, persist through fear and uncertainty and exercise agency despite resource constraints.

Table 2 provides definitions of the key constructs used in the findings and discussion.

Theme 1: Entrepreneurial mindset for transition

Entrepreneurial mindset refers to opportunity orientation, self-belief, problem-solving orientation and willingness to imagine entrepreneurship as a viable pathway. The findings show that participants required an entrepreneurial mindset consisting of self-belief, entrepreneurial skills and practical experience to transition. One participant described the entrepreneurial mindset as:

> '[D]eveloping problem-solving abilities, resilience, leadership, adaptability, and a value-driven mindset.' (P16)

> 'Well, I'm an enthusiastic, self-motivated person who is eager to learn new things to enhance my professional skills and capabilities. Well, I'm a businessperson.' (P7)

The most important skill that triggered action was the ability to solve problems and perceive problems as opportunities. This mindset energised participants and generated entrepreneurial thrill, particularly when participants imagined creating something new and seeing it used by others:

> 'I fell in love with solving problems and I had realised that there's a space that we have not sort of explored as young people … to say, in the million-rand industry of the potato business, where are we, where do we find ourselves as young people?.' (P1)

However, the findings also show that mindset alone did not guarantee transition. Some non-transitioners had entrepreneurial exposure and self-belief but delayed action because they wanted to build work experience, reduce risk or stabilise family responsibilities. This suggests that mindset is a necessary but insufficient transition resource: it stimulates intention and opportunity recognition but requires connectedness, resilience and agency to become action:

> 'I needed to gain experience in the banking environment. It provided extensive exposure to business operations and challenges, which was important for me as I was also focused on building a stable structure for my family.' (P25)

> 'I suppose every entrepreneur will tell you this, it has become cliché, but I think I enjoy the effect of creating something from scratch and having seen people enjoy it – creating a solution and see people use it – that is the motivation. It gives me the dopamine effect. And I think that is where I derive my happiness.' (P8)

Theme 2: Entrepreneurial connectedness

Entrepreneurial connectedness refers to the ability to access, build and mobilise formal and informal networks, including family, peers, mentors, customers and institutional actors. Networking gave participants access to learning, customers, opportunities, moral support and mentorship. It also helped some participants convert intention into concrete action by providing practical knowledge and social legitimacy:

> 'Networking is very important, not just to look at someone, "oh I am networking with her, she will get me business," but networking to learn and to just feed on that, and mentorship in any capacity is going to assist. Entrepreneurs like practical stuff.' (P4)

> 'So, learning the skills of networking and being able to put away your inner emotions and … have to be like … okay this is for work, this is not for me, this is for work; it is more than just myself that I have to branch out and have to ask people, and speak to people and learn.' (P3)

> 'The connections that I built and the rapport that I suppose I built with some people and some guys, I was easily able to find jobs that are decent.' (P5)

Connectedness also appeared among participants who did not transition, which again suggests that the presence of a competency is not sufficient unless it is mobilised towards action. Participants who transitioned used networks to obtain practical guidance, market access or entrepreneurial confidence. Participants who did not transition often valued networking but did not convert it into venture enactment:

> 'Mentors and role models have always been there for me; therefore, I would not say this has been a barrier to action.' (P13)

Theme 3: Entrepreneurial psychosocial resilience

Psychosocial resilience refers to the capacity to withstand fear of failure, social doubt, negative perceptions and emotional discouragement during the transition process. Participants reported that young entrepreneurs often face scepticism, low trust and social judgement. These pressures affected perceived behavioural control and contributed to entrepreneurial dipping among some participants:

> 'So, it's the disconnect of having an economy that trusts us or having an economy that backs us and so, when we do it a lot of the time, young people when they come up with products, we depend on other young people to buy into our product.' (P9)

> 'And especially because I am young, people would think "Who does this kid think he is? Why does he think he has such authority?" So, most of the time, it is mainly those types of situations, but also just the thing of caring about other people and not wanting to be uncomfortable has been my issue when it comes to shooting at locations.' (P3)

Transitioners did not necessarily experience fewer fears or social barriers; rather, they demonstrated greater ability to persist despite them. Resilience, therefore, helped participants move through entrepreneurial dipping instead of withdrawing from action. Non-transitioners, by contrast, often described fear of failure, social judgement, financial loss or uncertainty as reasons to delay action:

> 'The fear of failure must be one of the factors that has always hindered me from starting my own business. As much as we are told that failure is part of the journey in the entrepreneurial space, it is hard to accept, especially if things such as time and finances are invested.' (P13)

> 'And we have had to contend with the fact that we are the unknown players and the only way we can gain entrance into those doors, into those rooms is by providing, is by giving tangible proof – not just saying we have an idea or whatever, no one will buy into that.' (P8)

Theme 4: Entrepreneurial agency

Entrepreneurial agency refers to the capacity to act despite uncertainty, limited resources, institutional friction and environmental constraints. The agency was most visible when participants moved from recognising barriers to finding ways around them. This included developing

TABLE 2: Definitions of key constructs used in the findings.

Construct	Definition	Role in transition
Entrepreneurial mindset	Opportunity orientation, self-belief, problem-solving orientation and willingness to imagine entrepreneurship as a viable pathway.	Stimulates positive entrepreneurial attitude, desirability, opportunity recognition and thrill.
Entrepreneurial connectedness	Ability to access, build and mobilise formal and informal networks, including family, peers, mentors, customers and institutions.	Transforms subjective norms into support, legitimacy, learning and resource access.
Psychosocial resilience	Capacity to withstand fear of failure, social doubt, negative perceptions and emotional discouragement.	Supports perceived behavioural control by helping participants persist through entrepreneurial dipping.
Entrepreneurial agency	Capacity to act despite uncertainty, limited resources, institutional friction and environmental constraints.	Converts perceived behavioural control into concrete action.
Entrepreneurial thrill	Energising excitement associated with opportunity recognition, creation and early enactment.	Accelerates movement from intention towards action.
Entrepreneurial dipping	Loss of confidence, motivation or momentum when social, psychological, economic or institutional barriers emerge.	Interrupts movement and can lead to delay, exit or reversion.

TABLE 3: Comparative role of competencies among transitioners and non-transitioners.

Competency	Transitioners	Non-transitioners or exit cases	Interpretation
Theme 1: Entrepreneurial mindset	Identified opportunities and acted on them through venture creation or side-hustling.	Often displayed entrepreneurial aspiration but delayed action to gain experience or stability.	Mindset is necessary but insufficient.
Theme 2: Entrepreneurial connectedness	Mobilised networks, mentors and customers to access knowledge, legitimacy and resources.	Valued networks but did not always convert them into entrepreneurial action.	Connectedness matters when mobilised, not merely possessed.
Theme 3: Psychosocial resilience	Persisted despite fear, rejection, social doubt and scepticism towards youth entrepreneurs.	Fear of failure, social judgement or discouragement weakened transition momentum.	Resilience helps participants move through entrepreneurial dipping.
Theme 4: Entrepreneurial agency	Acted despite funding constraints, institutional friction and market uncertainty.	External barriers were often interpreted as reasons to wait, pause or exit.	Agency converts perceived control into action.

informal and formal funding channels, approaching potential customers, starting small, entering side-hustles or re-entering entrepreneurship after failure:

> 'I have never had a general problem of how to raise money to start a business. It has never been a thing; I have always had a blueprint on how to raise money.' (P1)
>
> 'And not being afraid to be rejected or be turned down, because people are busy, and others may not even have the urge to sort of open their doors to things like that.' (P5)

Agency also helps distinguish internal barriers from external barriers. Internal barriers included fear of failure, lack of confidence, reluctance to take risk and emotional exhaustion. External barriers included access to funding, weak institutional support, bureaucratic friction, market uncertainty and political obstacles. The transition depended on how participants interpreted and acted in relation to these barriers. Where barriers were experienced as final constraints, entrepreneurial dipping led to delay, exit or reversion. Where barriers were treated as conditions to be navigated, agency supported action:

> 'It can be discouraging when your vision is not immediately understood or when doors remain closed simply because your solution does not fit into the conventional mould. This disconnect can create feelings of isolation and self-doubt, particularly when you are navigating the complexities of building a venture with limited resources and limited buy-in. Yet, it is in these moments that resilience, clarity of purpose, and a supportive ecosystem become most crucial.' (P16)

Comparative transition patterns

The results show that entrepreneurial competencies contributed to different modes of transition. Some participants enacted full ventures, some engaged partially through side-hustling, some exited entrepreneurial action, and others reverted to intention after failure or contextual constraint. The comparative pattern is summarised in Table 3.

This comparison shows that mindset and connectedness were widely present, but transition depended on whether participants mobilised these competencies together with resilience and agency. In TPB terms, the findings suggest that favourable attitudes and supportive norms must be translated into perceived and enacted behavioural control. The action-phase perspective further shows that movement is not linear: participants can move from intention to action, from action to exit or from exit back to intention:

> 'I have not registered the business because it is still small. I think once I get to a point where now I can see I am making a certain amount, then it makes sense for me to register.' (P4)
>
> 'I am employed now. I am also pursuing an entrepreneurship venture; it is a technology startup. It is the one that went through the Founders Factory.' (P5)
>
> 'So, we were afraid that someone is going to start a business with maybe making cakes and more. So, because we did not have enough resources and the funding, we were somehow limited to what we had to do.' (P12)

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to explore entrepreneurial competencies in the transition from intention to action among youth. The study contributes a model (Figure 1 and Figure 2) that integrates four competencies – entrepreneurial mindset, connectedness, psychosocial resilience and agency – with emotional states and transition outcomes. The findings show that the intention-action gap is not adequately explained by intention strength alone. Instead, movement towards action depends on whether competencies are mobilised under emotional and contextual pressure.

Context	TPB intention formation	Transition competencies	(Emotional momentum)	TPB Action
Entrepreneurship training	Attitudes	Entrepreneurial mindset	(Entrepreneurial thrill)	Partial entrepreneurial activity
	Subjective norms	Entrepreneurial connectedness	(Social support or social doubt)	Full-time entrepreneurial activity
	Perceived behavioural control	Psychosocial resilience + entrepreneurial agency	(Dipping, persistence, exit, reversion or action)	Entrepreneurial exit

TPB, Theory of Planned Behaviour.

FIGURE 1: Competence-emotion model of the intention-action transition.

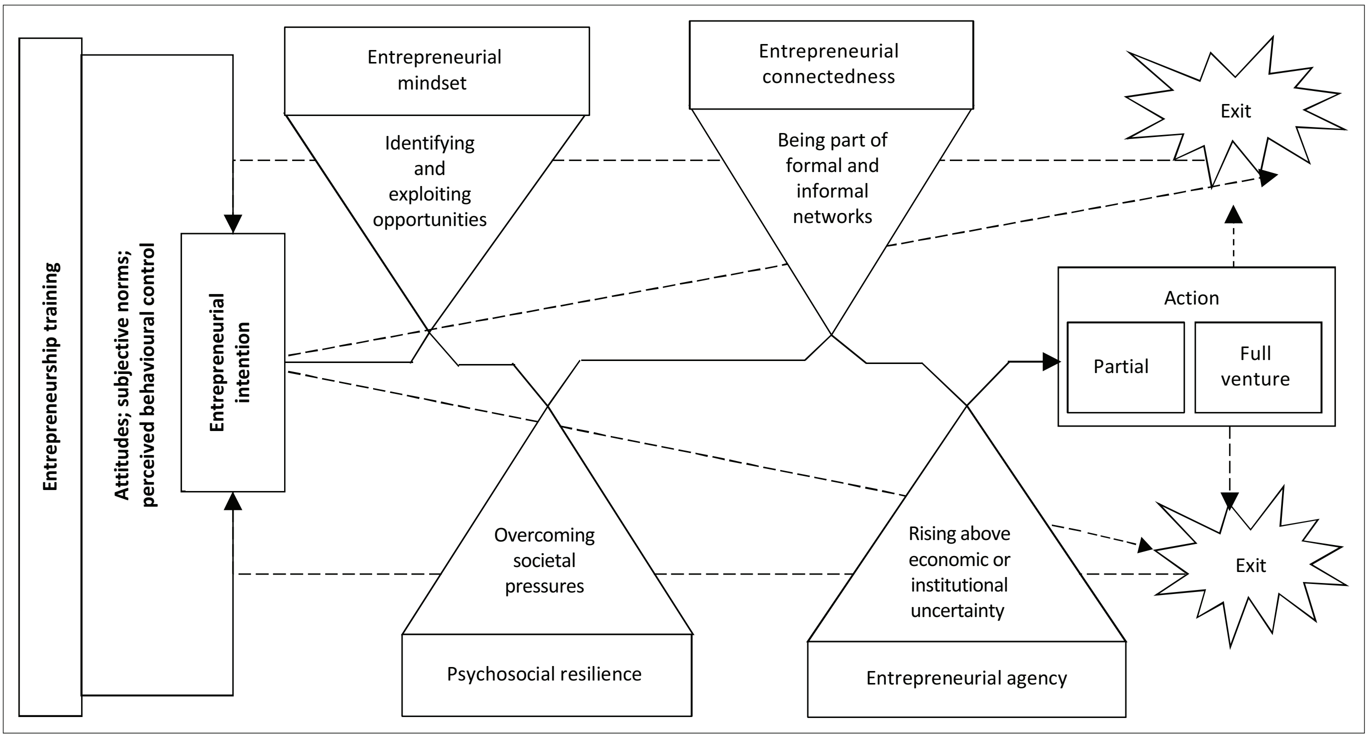

FIGURE 2: Competencies in the transition from entrepreneurial intention to action.

From Theory of Planned Behaviour intention to entrepreneurial action: A competence-emotion mechanism

The findings extend TPB by showing that favourable attitudes, supportive norms and perceived behavioural control do not automatically result in entrepreneurial action. Entrepreneurship training may strengthen the attitudinal, normative and perceived control conditions associated with entrepreneurial intention, but the post-intention transition also requires competencies that enable action under uncertainty (Al-Qadasi et al. 2024; Bae et al. 2014; Ripolles & Blesa 2023). Entrepreneurial mindset maps most closely onto attitudes because it reflects opportunity orientation, self-belief and the perceived desirability of creating value. Entrepreneurial connectedness maps onto subjective norms because networks, mentors, family and peers shape whether entrepreneurship is socially reinforced or discouraged. Psychosocial resilience and entrepreneurial agency map onto perceived behavioural control because they influence whether young people believe they can act despite uncertainty, fear, resource constraints and institutional friction.

The study, therefore, suggests that competencies translate TPB constructs into action, while emotions shape the momentum of this transition. Building on Grichnik et al. (2010), who show that joy can positively influence opportunity evaluation while fear can negatively influence opportunity exploitation, our study shows that entrepreneurial thrill energises action when participants experience excitement, possibility and confidence. Entrepreneurial dipping interrupts action when fear, social doubt, economic uncertainty or institutional barriers reduce confidence and perceived feasibility. This self-regulatory mechanism helps explain why participants with similar intentions experienced divergent outcomes: full venture enactment, side-hustling, exit or reversion to intention (Kautonen, Van Gelderen & Fink 2015).

Entrepreneurial mindset and connectedness as necessary but insufficient competencies

The findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that entrepreneurship training is unimportant. On the contrary, prior research has shown that entrepreneurship education and training can strengthen entrepreneurial attitudes, intentions, self-efficacy and action readiness (Al-Qadasi et al. 2024; Bae et al. 2014; Ripolles & Blesa 2023). The contribution of this study is to clarify how such training may matter in the post-intention phase. Training may provide participants with the language of entrepreneurship, practical exposure, confidence, opportunity recognition skills and access to networks. These elements help explain why the entrepreneurial mindset and connectedness emerged as important transition resources. They should therefore be understood not as fixed personality traits, but as competencies that can be cultivated through training and then activated when individuals move from intention towards action.

This interpretation also highlights the emotional dimension of the transition. Emotions influence how entrepreneurs evaluate and exploit opportunities, with positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm and excitement supporting opportunity evaluation and action, while fear can heighten perceptions of risk and uncertainty (Foo 2011; Grichnik et al. 2010). In this study, mindset and connectedness appeared to generate positive emotional momentum by helping participants see opportunities as desirable, personally meaningful and socially supported. However, positive emotion alone did not always carry participants into sustained action. When participants encountered rejection, weak market trust, funding constraints or institutional uncertainty, fear and doubt became more salient. At that point, psychosocial resilience and entrepreneurial agency became necessary to sustain movement from intention into action.

Psychosocial resilience, agency and entrepreneurial dipping

Psychosocial resilience and agency were especially important when participants encountered entrepreneurial dipping. Dipping occurred when social scepticism, fear of failure, institutional complexity, funding constraints or economic uncertainty weakened motivation and perceived feasibility. Resilience helped participants withstand these pressures, while agency enabled them to act despite them. This finding extends work on fear of failure, self-regulation and action uncertainty (Duong 2022; Frese & Gielnik 2023; Van Gelderen et al. 2018) by showing how emotional interruption can be managed through competence mobilisation.

Entrepreneurial agency further strengthens the action-process contribution. Agency was not simply optimism or confidence; it involved decision-making under constraint, resourcefulness, rejection tolerance and willingness to start with available means. This resonates with broader work on entrepreneurial agency and effectual action (Bandura 2001; McMullen, Brownell & Adams 2021; Sarasvathy 2001).

Cyclical transition outcomes

The findings show that the intention-action transition is cyclical rather than linear (Joensuu-Salo et al. 2020). Some participants moved fully into entrepreneurship; others engaged partially through side-hustles; some exited action and others reverted to intention after failure, risk or contextual blockage. Reversion should not be read simply as failure. In some cases, it represented continued entrepreneurial orientation, learning, waiting, or preparation for later action. This cyclical view strengthens the Rubicon and action-phase lens by showing that individuals can cross, retreat from and re-approach the entrepreneurial threshold over time (Brandstätter et al. 2003; Delanoë-Gueguen & Fayolle 2019).

Conclusion

This study investigated entrepreneurial competencies during the transition from intention to action. It advances intention-action research by showing that entrepreneurial mindset, connectedness, psychosocial resilience and agency shape whether youth move from intention into full venture enactment, partial engagement, exit or reversion. The study extends TPB by showing that attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control require phase-specific competencies before they become entrepreneurial action. It also extends action-phase research by showing that transition is emotionally charged and cyclical rather than linear.

The study introduced two emotional states. Entrepreneurial thrill refers to energising excitement associated with opportunity recognition, creation and early enactment. Entrepreneurial dipping refers to the loss of confidence, motivation or momentum when entrepreneurs encounter social, psychological, economic or institutional barriers. These emotions help explain why similarly intentioned individuals experience different transition pathways.

Practical implications

Entrepreneurship training institutions should map competencies to the phase-specific challenges of the intention-action transition. In the intention formation phase, programmes should develop entrepreneurial mindset through opportunity identification, problem-solving, entrepreneurial identity and self-belief. In the pre-action-phase, programmes should strengthen connectedness by giving participants access to mentors, peer networks, customers, alumni entrepreneurs and ecosystem actors. In the early action-phase, programmes should develop psychosocial resilience by preparing participants for rejection, fear of failure, social doubt and setbacks. In resource-constrained phases, programmes should strengthen entrepreneurial agency by teaching effectual action, bootstrapping, resource mobilisation, regulatory navigation and decision-making under uncertainty.

This phase-specific design moves entrepreneurship education beyond awareness and intention formation toward transition support. It also responds to the South African context, where young entrepreneurs often confront low trust, weak networks, funding constraints and institutional uncertainty.

Limitations and future research

Similar to most qualitative studies, this research is limited by its qualitative design, sample size and focus on young people who had undergone entrepreneurship training. The training programmes were not standardised across providers, duration, content, pedagogy or year of attendance. The study, therefore, does not claim that a particular training model caused entrepreneurial action. Instead, training was used as a purposive sampling criterion and contextual exposure. Future research could compare standardised and non-standardised entrepreneurship programmes to examine how different pedagogical approaches influence transition outcomes.

The wide spread in training years is another limitation. Participants trained between 2008 and 2023 had different amounts of time to start, pause, fail, re-enter or reinterpret entrepreneurship. Future longitudinal studies should examine how entrepreneurial competencies evolve over time and how intention, action, exit and reversion unfold across multiple phases. Finally, the study introduced linkages between entrepreneurial competencies and emotions. Future research could examine entrepreneurial thrill and dipping across different contexts and test whether these emotional states mediate or moderate the relationship between competencies and entrepreneurial action.

Acknowledgements

This article includes content that overlaps with research originally conducted as part of Nompumelelo Khumalo's master's thesis titled 'Factors preventing the youth from translating entrepreneurial intention into entrepreneurial action in South Africa', submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria in 2024. The thesis was supervised by Steven Zwane. Portions of the data, analysis and discussion have been revised, updated and adapted for publication as a journal article. The original thesis is publicly available at: https://repository.up.ac.za/items/b7385cf2-3a18-47a7-b39b-8d8387251667. The author affirms that this article complies with ethical standards for secondary publication, and appropriate acknowledgement has been made of the original work.

Competing interests

The authors, Nompumelelo Khumalo; Steven Zwane and Anastacia Mamabolo, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Nompumelelo Khumalo: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Software, Validation and Data curation. Steven Zwane: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Validation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision and Funding acquisition. Anastacia Mamabolo: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision and Funding acquisition. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research methodology training and fieldwork that informed the master's research report. This work was supported by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). Funding from the Absa Chair in Entrepreneurship supported the development of this article, derived from the master's research report and covered the open-access publication fees.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author, Steven Zwane, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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