

Bridging the entrepreneurial intention to behaviour gap using entrepreneurial role models



Authors:

Lupho A. Gila¹ 
Obey Dzomonda² 
Brownhilder N. Neneh² 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

²Business School, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Obey Dzomonda,
Dzomonda.O@ufs.ac.za

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Background: Entrepreneurship has emerged as a vital driver of economic growth and a key strategy for creating jobs in most developing countries. The South African government also believes that entrepreneurship can help address challenges such as youth unemployment. As such, identifying factors that can enhance the entrepreneurial intention and behaviour among the youth becomes vital.

Aim: This study aimed to assess whether entrepreneurial intention positively predicts entrepreneurial behaviour (EB) among students. Additionally, the study tested whether entrepreneurial role models moderate this relationship.

Setting: This study was conducted using students at a South African university.

Methods: The study collected quantitative data using a self-administered questionnaire. A sample size of 361 university students was recruited using convenience sampling. The data were analysed using partial least square structural equation modelling (SMART-PLS 4 software).

Results: It was established that entrepreneurial intention positively predicts actual behaviour. Surprisingly, only one of the four hypothesised role models (i.e. successful entrepreneurs) was a significant moderator in the relationship between entrepreneurial intention and actual behaviour.

Conclusion: This study provides empirical evidence that successful entrepreneurial role models are a necessary boundary condition that can help students transition from entrepreneurial intention to actual EB, which is crucial for new venture creation.

Contribution: The findings can guide universities and educators in integrating experiential entrepreneurship programmes and mentorship opportunities into the curriculum, particularly those involving successful entrepreneurs as guest lecturers, mentors or advisers, as these were found to be useful in this study.

Keywords: entrepreneurial behaviour; entrepreneurial intention; entrepreneurial role models; students' entrepreneurship; new venture.

Introduction

Globally, entrepreneurship has become a significant subject in most policy documents, owing to its perceived benefits, including improved standards of living, economic growth, job creation, poverty alleviation (Duong 2022; Iddris 2025) and curbing unemployment among young people (Al-Mamary & Alshallaqi 2022). As such, there is growing interest in students' entrepreneurship as a means to harness their potential in creating jobs (Anjum et al. 2022; Neneh & Dzomonda 2024) and helps to predict their potential and preparedness to become entrepreneurs (Anjum et al. 2022). Every entrepreneurial venture begins with the development of entrepreneurial intention (EI), which leads to future entrepreneurial behaviour (EB) (Frese & Gielnik 2023; Kong, Zhao & Tsai 2020). Entrepreneurial intention is 'a self-acknowledged conviction by a person that they intend to set up a new business venture and consciously plan to do so at some point in the future' (Thompson 2009:676), while EB describes the different actions taken by an individual to achieve an entrepreneurial goal (Doanh et al. 2021; Frese & Gielnik 2023). As entrepreneurship is a planned process, EI is regarded as a proximal factor closely linked to actual behaviour (Ajzen 1991; Duong 2023; Kong et al. 2020).

Within the student entrepreneurship context, studies focusing on the development of EI have drawn a lot of interest and produced a wealth of insights (Duong 2023; Neneh 2019; Shirokova, Osiyevskyy & Bogatyreva 2016; Tsou, Steel & Osiyevskyy 2023). However, a significant drawback noted in recent years is that not all students' EI translates into actual behaviour, leading to an

EI-behaviour gap (Duong 2023; Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2025; Kong et al. 2020). Some reasons accounting for the EI-behaviour gap emanate from factors such as fear of failure (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2025; Kong et al. 2020) and students choosing a full-time employment career path (Mackiewicz 2023; Neneh & Dzomonda 2024). In addition to this problem, there are inconsistencies in the findings regarding the EI-EB relationship. According to Tsou et al. (2023, p. 1), 'although the baseline relationship generally gets validated, reported correlations between EI and EB are highly inconsistent across available studies'. Tsou et al. (2023) further reported that existing studies on this relationship vary from negligible to substantial, depending on the context in which the study was conducted. In support, Zhuang and Sun (2025) found that in some instances EI is reported to account for between 20% and 70% of variance in actual behaviour, while it is reported to be lower than this in other contexts, suggesting the need for more studies on the EI-behaviour relationship in different contexts to address the prevailing inconsistencies in this relationship. On that account, existing studies (Shirokova et al. 2016; Tsou et al. 2023; Van Gelderen, Kautonen & Fink 2015) argue that it is necessary to examine factors that could translate intentions into EB.

We propose entrepreneurial role models as a crucial boundary condition that facilitates the translation of students' EIs into actual EB. As noted by Rajchamaha and Prapojanasomboon (2022:983), 'role models are individuals whose lives and activities inspire other people's conception of some ideal or expected behaviour'. Such individuals can inspire, motivate and guide others towards positive behaviours and attitudes (Rajchamaha & Prapojanasomboon 2022; Zali & Rezaei 2025). Nucci, Byrne and Dimov (2025) argue that role models play a crucial role in helping nascent entrepreneurs translate their EI into actual behaviour by instilling such individuals with an entrepreneurial mindset. Furthermore, entrepreneurial role models stimulate EB by supporting and encouraging upcoming entrepreneurs to take action to realise their new venture creation goal (Kong et al. 2020; Nucci et al. 2025; Saoula et al. 2025). It is also crucial to note that different types of role models can influence an individual to engage in EB (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021; Rajchamaha & Prapojanasomboon 2022). According to Abbasiachavari and Moritz (2021), these include entrepreneurial family role models, successful entrepreneurs, peer role models (PR) and educators. The argument is that these types of role models may influence individuals differently to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Nevertheless, existing literature has largely overlooked the differentiated effects of various types of role models on the entrepreneurial process within a single framework. This gap necessitates the need for the present study to examine whether each type of entrepreneurial role model, such as family role models, successful entrepreneurs, PR and educators, moderates the EI-EB relationship in a developing country context, such as South Africa.

Furthermore, although existing studies (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021; Boldureanu et al. 2020; Kong et al. 2020) enhance

our understanding of the role of entrepreneurial role models in the entrepreneurial process, they have some limitations that necessitate further empirical studies. For example, a study by Kong et al. (2020) conducted using a sample of college students from universities in China used a single-dimensional item to measure exposure to business role models. The students were asked to respond with either 'yes' or 'no' to indicate whether they had exposure to business role models. This measure may oversimplify a complex construct such as entrepreneurial role models. Another study by Boldureanu et al. (2020) only focused on the influence of entrepreneurial role models on the EIs of 1st-year master's students. Lastly, a study by Abbasiachavari and Moritz (2021) systemically reviewed 86 journal articles from 1988 to the end of March 2019, suggesting the need for empirical studies to examine how entrepreneurial role models influence students in transitioning from EI to actual behaviour in different contexts. Thus, our study nuances itself from the existing studies by empirically examining how different types of entrepreneurial role models moderate the relationship between EI and EB from a developing country context, such as South Africa. We argue that contextual factors such as high unemployment rates, a limited entrepreneurial culture, structural constraints within the higher education system and weak entrepreneurial framework conditions in South Africa (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2025) may amplify fear of failure among students and consequently influence their transition from EI to actual behaviour. Moreover, the South African entrepreneurial environment, characterised by limited access to start-up capital and limited institutional support for entrepreneurs (GEM 2025), may shape the EI-EB relationship differently from that observed in Global North contexts (Adam & Fayolle 2016; Gabay-Mariani & Boissin 2021; Shirokova et al. 2016), where entrepreneurial ecosystems are more developed and supportive.

Our study contributes to existing literature in two ways. Firstly, our study contributes to the entrepreneurship literature by exploring the EI-behaviour link using a sample of students from a developing country context, such as South Africa, therefore, providing a contextual understanding of this relationship. Secondly, our study proposes and tests the moderating role of different types of entrepreneurial role models, including family role models, successful entrepreneurs, PR and educators, on the EI-behaviour link in a single model, an approach lacking in the existing literature. By establishing that among the four types of role models hypothesised, only successful entrepreneurial role models (SERM) moderated the EI-behaviour relationship, this study provides a more contextually grounded explanation of which specific type of role models is a necessary boundary condition for students in a developing country such as South Africa to translate their EI into actual behaviour.

Theoretical framework

This study adopted two vital theories such as the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen 1991) and the social learning

theory (SLT) (Bandura 1977) to explain the association among variables in the conceptual model. The TPB was developed by Ajzen (1991) to explain the development of EI and actual behaviour. Ajzen (1991) posits that EI results from the interaction of three crucial variables such as attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Attitude describes an individual's perception of whether it is favourable to engage in a certain behaviour (Ajzen 1991). This means that the expectations and beliefs about the benefits and challenges of an entrepreneurial career are the basis for an individual's attitude towards engaging in related behaviour. Subjective norms describe whether the individual will act because of the influence of those around them. Thus, individuals are likely to engage in certain behaviour if they believe that those around them support them to do so (Ajzen 1991). Subjective norms are also often associated with societal pressure on the individual to engage in a certain behaviour deemed socially desirable (Ajzen 1991). Perceived behavioural control is referred to as an individual's judgement of their capacity to carry out a specific behaviour (Ajzen 1991). The level of control a person has over their behaviour determines their capability to act and predict future behaviour (Ajzen 1991). The TPB also postulates that EI precedes EB. This suggests that strong intentions propel individuals to engage in EB (Ajzen 1991). The TPB has been adopted widely in existing studies in entrepreneurship, demonstrating its usefulness as a theoretical framework to explain the formation of EI and actual behaviour.

We further adopted the SLT (Bandura 1977) to theorise the inclusion of role models in the conceptual model of this study. According to Bandura (1977), individuals can learn not only directly but also by observing the actions of others and the consequences that follow in social settings. Bandura (1977) highlighted four key processes involved in observational learning: attention (noticing the behaviour), retention (remembering it), reproduction (being able to replicate it) and motivation (having a reason to imitate it). According to Bandura (1977), an individual's attention is drawn from observing successful individuals around them who become their role models. The retention processes encompass the recollection of an experience or behaviour over a specific period. To ensure a skilful mastery of observational learning, it is crucial to evaluate and reproduce the observed behaviour (Bandura 1977). The process of reproduction is a complex one, requiring both mental and physical faculties to mimic observed behaviour while performing a given task (Bandura 1977; Johnson 2018). Lastly, Bandura (1977) argues that motivation is primarily driven by human agency rather than external factors such as positive rewards. Once individuals have identified their role models, they are motivated to engage in certain behaviour. Furthermore, Bandura indicated that the issues of reinforcement and punishment also model the behaviour that can be learned from role models. Vicarious reinforcement involves a person's behaviour changing as a result of observing another person's behaviour being reinforced, without being actively reinforced themselves (Bandura 1977). This process is a behavioural mechanism that causes an

observer to behave more like a model because of the model's behaviour being reinforced or punished (Bandura 1977). The SLT is a vital theory for this study because it helps to explain the role of environmental factors (role models) in the conceptual model of this study. The SLT has also been widely used in entrepreneurship studies across different contexts.

Integrating the TPB and SLT provides a novel and comprehensive framework for understanding the determinants of EB among students. While the TPB explains how EI predicts behaviour, existing studies relying solely on the TPB to predict behaviour have been criticised for overlooking the contextual factors that influence individuals' translation of their intentions into action (Duong 2023; Tsou et al. 2023). By incorporating SLT, which emphasises learning through observation and imitation of role models, this study introduces a crucial social dimension into the TPB framework from a developing country context. This integration acknowledges that, beyond internal cognitive drivers, students' engagement in entrepreneurial activities is shaped by observing others who have successfully engaged in entrepreneurship, thereby enhancing self-efficacy and reducing fear of failure. In developing contexts such as South Africa, where entrepreneurial engagement among students remains low because of several challenges, including weak entrepreneurial framework conditions (GEM 2025), role models can inspire and motivate students to persist in implementing their entrepreneurial goals, such as starting a business. Therefore, combining TPB and SLT offers a theoretical perspective that helps bridge gaps in the existing literature by identifying role models as a boundary condition that can strengthen or weaken the EI-behaviour relationship from a developing country context. This approach enhances our understanding of why some students act on their EIs while others do not (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021), thereby providing a more contextually grounded explanation relevant to developing economies, such as South Africa.

Hypothesis development

This section provides a discussion on the hypothesised relationships, particularly the association between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behaviour and the moderating role of entrepreneurial role models in this association. These hypothesised relationships are depicted in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, entrepreneurial intention is the independent variable, while entrepreneurial behaviour is the dependent variable. Entrepreneurial role models are included in the conceptual framework as moderating variables in the association between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behaviour as shown in Figure 1.

Entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behaviour

The association between EI and actual behaviour is crucial in the entrepreneurial domain (Frese & Gielnik 2023; Waheed, Laeequddin & Sahay 2025). This is because it forms the foundation of how an individual starts with an entrepreneurial goal, which is then implemented to start a

business (Frese & Gielnik 2023). According to Ajzen (1991), EI is a precursor to EB. This suggests that for one to engage in entrepreneurship, they could have thought about it for some time (Cui & Bell 2022). Other studies also support the view that EI is a crucial determinant of entrepreneurial activities (Duong 2022; Neneh & Dzomonda 2024). Therefore, positive EI is required to enhance actual behaviour (Ajzen 1991). Mackiewicz (2023) argues that new venture creation is an intentional activity rather than an unplanned event. Engaging in EB demonstrates the ability to pursue the initial goal and engage in actual activities crucial for new venture creation (Duong 2022). According to Kong et al. (2020), individuals with high EIs are more likely to establish a new business than those with weak EI. This is because individuals with high EIs are more willing to take risks, embrace uncertainty and persist in the face of challenges. Existing literature explains that EI is not merely a desire or wish to start a business, but a cognitive state that precedes EB (Naskar & Lindahl 2025; Waheed et al. 2025). It represents an individual's commitment to starting a business and reflects their readiness to act towards realising their entrepreneurial goals (Gieure, Benavides-Espinosa & Roig-Dobón 2020; Saoula et al. 2025; Tran et al. 2024). Extant scholarly work suggests that EI is a crucial determinant for actual behaviour (Duong 2022; Frese & Gielnik 2023; Neneh 2019; Neneh & Dzomonda 2024). These studies confirm the foundations of the TPB, which suggests that without an intention, it is difficult to track the development of a particular behaviour (Naskar & Lindahl 2025). Existing studies (Tsou et al. 2023; Zhuang & Sun 2025) argue that although the EI-behaviour relationship is often established, inconsistencies exist in the findings. The findings on the effect of EI on behaviour range from negligible to large. While a study by Zhuang and Sun (2025) found that in some instances, EI is reported to account for between 20% and 70% of variance in actual behaviour, a study by Tsou et al. (2023) reported that EI accounted for only 17% of variance in actual behaviour. These inconsistencies necessitate more empirical studies to bridge these gaps. Understanding the association between EI and actual behaviour is particularly important in the context of South Africa, where the government is actively seeking alternative ways to create employment to address the country's various socio-economic challenges (GEM 2025). On this account, this study hypothesises that:

H1: Entrepreneurial intention positively influences entrepreneurial behaviour.

The moderating role of entrepreneurial role models

Role models play a crucial role in the entrepreneurial process (Nucci et al. 2025). Thus, role models can help an individual translate their EI into behaviour (Kong et al. 2020). Entrepreneurial role models offer personal motivations and behavioural guidance, which has a significant influence on EB (Nucci et al. 2025). Existing literature suggests that there are different types of role models that influence individuals differently in their decision to become entrepreneurs (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021; Kong et al. 2020; Nucci

et al. 2025). Based on this account, it becomes crucial to understand the role of each type as a necessary boundary condition to understand the EI-EB relationship.

Family role models

Existing studies assert that successful entrepreneurial parents can inspire an individual to consider an entrepreneurial career through socialisation (Nucci et al. 2025; Rajchamaha & Prapojanasomboon 2022). Parents and immediate family are the first sphere closely linked to childhood development. As such, what an individual observes as they grow becomes part of their reality and shapes career choices, such as becoming an entrepreneur (Nucci et al. 2025). In support, Maleki et al. (2023) assert that the immediate family has an impact on an individual's behaviour, values, personal growth and development. This suggests that individuals born into an entrepreneurial family are more likely to develop an intention and subsequently behave in a manner consistent with starting a business (Roos & Botha 2022; Xuan & Yankai 2025). Successful entrepreneurial parents can serve as a source of inspiration for their children to consider venturing into entrepreneurship (Haque, Kour & Mahin 2024). Engagement in EB is influenced by family, as having an entrepreneurial family can foster an entrepreneurial identity among children, enabling them to learn the dynamics of running a business at a younger age (Bagherian, Soleimanof & Feyzbakhsh 2025; Roos & Botha 2022). This implies that individuals with a high exposure to successful entrepreneurial family members will likely engage in entrepreneurial activities than those with low exposure. Whether this effect is uniform across developed and developing country contexts remains indistinct. On this account, the hypothesis is stated as:

H2a: Family role models positively moderate the entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behaviour association among university students.

Successful entrepreneurs as role models

Knowing successful entrepreneurs enhances one's confidence in becoming an entrepreneur (Boldureanu et al. 2020; Bosma et al. 2012). According to Boldureanu et al. (2020), a successful entrepreneurial role model can assume various roles that help the potential entrepreneur navigate all stages of the business life cycle. In this case, a successful entrepreneurial role model can assume the role of a coach throughout the stages of the entrepreneurial venture, inspiring and intellectually stimulating the nascent entrepreneur to think creatively, thus helping them navigate the challenging entrepreneurial career (Boldureanu et al. 2020). Ideally, having someone successful in business can increase one's propensity and confidence to start their own business (Nucci et al. 2025). Successful entrepreneurs inspire and motivate individuals to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021). According to Kong et al. (2020), individuals who can easily interact with successful role models tend to exhibit lower levels of fear of failure, which triggers them to engage in entrepreneurial activities. This is particularly important in the context of South Africa,

characterised by a challenging entrepreneurial environment with weak institutional support for young entrepreneurs (GEM 2025). Thus, exposure to entrepreneurs who have built successful businesses in the same environment and context can help shape the entrepreneurial mindset of students, helping them transition from EI to actual behaviour.

Furthermore, existing literature reports that individuals with high exposure to SERM tend to engage in actual behaviour more than those with low exposure (Abbasianchavari & Moritz 2021; Kong et al. 2020; Nucci et al. 2025). Although existing literature enhances our understanding of the impact of SERM on the entrepreneurial process, there are limited studies that have explored the moderating role of SERM in the EI-behaviour relationship in the context of South Africa. On this background, this study hypothesises that:

H2b: Successful entrepreneurial role models positively moderate the entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behaviour association among university students.

Peer role models

Scholars and policymakers have shown a keen interest in understanding the influence of peers on individuals' decisions to become entrepreneurs (Portyanko et al. 2023). Existing studies show that peers influence one another to pursue certain careers, such as entrepreneurship (Lingappa, Shah & Mathew 2020; Portyanko et al. 2023). This phenomenon is mostly common among university peers who are spatially close to each other. Thus, peers may have a greater influence on others regarding entrepreneurial endeavours and achievements than formal institutional structures or policies (Abbasianchavari & Moritz 2021). Specifically, such role models increase the likelihood of students choosing a business-related major and deciding to pursue business interests after graduation (Bosma et al. 2012; Portyanko et al. 2023). This suggests that students with exposure to peers who successfully run a business are more likely to opt for entrepreneurial activities to start their own business than those without successful PR. To further test this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2c: Peer role models positively moderate the entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behaviour association among university students.

Educators as role models

Educators play a crucial role in influencing the EB of students (Abbasianchavari & Moritz 2021). According to Machingambi and Iwu (2025:4), 'ideal entrepreneurship educators need to guide learners through the four-stage process, that is, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation'. Prastyaningtyas et al. (2023) emphasise the pivotal role played by educators in developing and enhancing students' entrepreneurial skills. The study found that through their guidance and instruction, educators can help students develop the knowledge, mindset and confidence needed to identify and pursue opportunities. A study by Iwu et al.

(2021), conducted with a sample of university students in South Africa, found that the competencies of entrepreneurship education educators have a positive influence on EI. Nevertheless, another study by Diegoli et al. (2018) found that the educator's business experience was not a significant determinant of engagement in entrepreneurial activities. Be that as it may, existing literature reports that students with access to educators who have real-world experience in running a business tend to find it easier to translate their EI into actual behaviour (Abbasianchavari & Moritz 2021; Machingambi & Iwu 2025; Zhou, Rashid & Cheng 2024). This is because educators with previous business experience find it easier to integrate experiential learning into their teaching methods, thereby boosting the students' confidence in their entrepreneurial capabilities. This is particularly important in the context of South Africa, where students display high fear of failure and low entrepreneurial drive to start a business. Thus, these educators can help students translate their EI into behaviour by nurturing their entrepreneurial mindset, which values experimentation, adaptability and opportunity recognition and exploitation in a challenging entrepreneurial environment, such as South Africa. On this backdrop, the study proposes to test the following hypothesis:

H2d: Successful educators positively moderate the entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behaviour association among university students.

Research methods and design

This study adopted a quantitative research method with a descriptive research design. This study was aligned with the cross-sectional time horizon, as data were collected only once from the participants. This study considered university students from a South African university as the targeted population. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire. A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit the participants as they were readily available and willing to participate. In addition, the Faculty of Economic and Management Science was selected because it has a sufficient number of students enrolled for an entrepreneurship education course, making the sample suitable for our aims. The data were collected in two waves 3 months apart, consistent with existing studies (Meoli et al. 2020; Shirokova et al. 2016). Shirokova et al. (2016) argue that the time to measure intentions and actions should not be too long; otherwise, this can increase the likelihood that an unexpected event would take place and cause an intention to change. Data related to the independent variable (EI), control variables and role models were collected in the first wave (T1). Data related to the dependent variable (EB) were collected in the second wave (T2). Unique codes and emails were used to track the questionnaires in both waves 1 and 2. In the initial period (T1), 415 questionnaires were distributed to the students by the researcher. After removing spoiled questionnaires, a total of 380 questionnaires were considered usable, resulting in a response rate of 92%. In the second wave (T2), 380 questionnaires were distributed to the students and 361 usable questionnaires were received, resulting in a final response rate of 87% for both wave 1 and wave 2.

Measures

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of disagreement or agreement on a statement anchored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree (SD) to (5) strongly agree (SA).

Entrepreneurial intention

Entrepreneurial intention was measured using six items adapted from the entrepreneurial intent questionnaire developed by Liñán and Chen's study (2009). Sample items included 'My professional goal is to become an entrepreneur' and 'I have very seriously thought of starting a firm'.

Entrepreneurial behaviour

The measure for EB consisted of 10 items adapted from existing studies (Duong 2022; Gieure et al. 2020). These 10 items were statements that represent different entrepreneurial activities. Sample items included 'I have a business plan written up', and 'I have money already to set the business up'. Nevertheless, five items that loaded below the recommended factor loading of 0.7 (Hair et al. 2019) were deleted.

Entrepreneurial role models

The entrepreneurial role model scale was evaluated using 19 items adapted from existing literature (Abbasianchavari & Moritz 2021; Bosma et al. 2012).

Parental role models

Five items were used to measure the influence of parental role models (PRM). Sample items included 'My parents are most likely to influence me to pursue a career in entrepreneurship'. However, two survey items that loaded below the recommended factor loading of 0.7 and above were deleted.

Successful entrepreneurial role model

Six items were employed to assess the impact of successful entrepreneurs as role models. Some of the sample items were 'I aspire to become like my role model, who is a successful entrepreneur'. Nevertheless, two items with factor loadings lower than the recommended 0.7 and above (Hair et al. 2019) were deleted.

Educators as role models

This construct was measured using four items. Some of the sample items included 'My mentor encouraged me to take courses, seminars, and workshops to develop my competence'.

Peer role models

Peer educator role models were assessed using four items adapted from existing literature (Abbasianchavari & Moritz 2021; Bosma et al. 2012). Some of the sample items included 'I have a friend who is an entrepreneur'.

Control variables

To account for potential alternative explanations for actual behaviour, the study also included control variables such as age, gender, family business background (FBB) and prior business experience. Existing studies indicate that these factors influence EB (Shirokova et al. 2016).

Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS and Smart-PLS 4. Specifically, the SPSS software was used to compute descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviations as well as correlations among variables. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) using SMART-PLS version 4 was used to test the hypothesised relationships regarding the influence of entrepreneurial role models on the link between EIs and EB. Partial least squares structural equation modelling was particularly well-suited for this study as it enabled the researchers to examine a complex model that incorporated the moderating effects of multiple entrepreneurial role models on the EI-EB relationship.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Free State, General/Human Research Ethics Committee (No. UFS-HSD2023/0892). This study adhered to all ethical guidelines in research involving humans as participants. The study obtained ethical clearance from the university ethics committee before commencing with data collection. All the participants in the study provided informed consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Results

Background information of the participants

In this study, the findings showed that the majority of the participants (65%) were females while 35% were males. These participants were mainly aged 18–21 years (67.6%) followed by those aged 22–25 years (29.9%), clearly demonstrating the general age distribution of undergraduate students in South African universities. The findings further showed that the majority of the surveyed students were black people (91%), followed by those who identified themselves as Coloured people (6%) and lastly white people (3%). In terms of prior business experience, 75% of the participants indicated that they did not have any prior business experience, while only 25% of the participants agreed that they had previously operated a business.

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 1 presents results on the descriptive statistics and correlations among the key variables of the study. The findings show that the students possess a moderate level of EI (mean = 3.74; SD = 1.14), with low EB, as indicated by an average mean of 2.70. This implies that the university students surveyed are not actively engaging in entrepreneurial activities. In terms of exposure to different role models, the

findings showed that participants had moderate exposure to PRM (mean = 3.75) and PR (mean = 3.63). On the other hand, the results showed that participants had a weak exposure to successful entrepreneurs as role models (mean = 3.37) and educator role models (mean = 2.91). In terms of correlations, the findings showed that EI was positively correlated with EB ($r = 0.496$; $p < 0.01$). The findings further showed that EI was positively correlated with PRM ($r = 0.296$; $p < 0.01$), SERM ($r = 0.508$; $p < 0.01$) and PR ($r = 0.342$; $p < 0.01$). Nevertheless, the correlation between EI and educators as role models (EM) was insignificant ($r = 0.029$; $p > 0.05$). Lastly, the findings showed that EB was positively correlated with PRM ($r = 0.249$; $p < 0.01$), SERM ($r = 0.502$; $p < 0.01$), PR ($r = 0.332$; $p < 0.01$) and EM ($r = 0.254$; $p < 0.01$).

Assessment of the measurement model

According to Hair et al. (2019), the first step when using SMART-PLS is to evaluate the quality of the measurement model. This is intended to assess the extent to which adapted constructs accurately and consistently measure the intended concepts (Hair et al. 2019). The results show that all the factors loaded accurately. As shown in Table 2 above, the factor loadings range from 0.712 to 0.922, which is acceptable. The assessment of reliability for the scales was performed using Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability. The CA values ranged from 0.703 to 0.914, while composite reliability values ranged from 0.740 to 0.933 indicating that the scales were reliable. These values were above the recommended threshold of 0.70 as suggested by Hair et al. (2019). To evaluate the convergent validity of the constructs, the researchers used the AVE. The study's AVE values ranged from 0.553 to 0.746, indicating satisfactory levels of convergent validity.

Discriminant validity

Table 3 presents discriminant validity results. We adopted the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations to assess discriminant validity. The HTMT is considered a more precise measure for discriminant validity compared to other existing criteria, such as the Fornell-Larcker criteria (Hair et al. 2019; Henseler, Hubona & Ray 2016). Using this criterion, discriminant validity is achieved when the values are below 0.9 or within a more conservative value of 0.85 (Hair et al. 2019). In this study, discriminant validity was achieved as all the HTMT values fell within the recommended threshold.

TABLE 1: Mean, standard deviation and correlations ($N = 361$).

Constructs	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. EI	3.74	1.14	1	-	-	-	-	-
2. EB	2.70	1.13	0.496**	1	-	-	-	-
3. PRM	3.75	1.19	0.296**	0.249**	1	-	-	-
4. SERM	3.37	1.20	0.508**	0.502**	0.303**	1	-	-
5. PR	3.63	1.15	0.342**	0.332**	0.513**	0.487**	1	-
6. EM	2.91	1.29	0.029	0.254**	0.174**	0.310**	0.231**	1

SD, standard deviation; EI, entrepreneurial intention; EB, entrepreneurial behaviour; SERM, successful entrepreneurial role models; EM, educators as role models; PR, peer role models; PRM, parental role models; CA, Cronbach's alpha; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted.

**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Structural model assessment

According to Hair et al. (2019), the structural model should be assessed for its explanatory power by evaluating the R^2 values. Additionally, the structural model should be evaluated to ensure that it is free from collinearity issues by assessing the variance inflation factor (VIF) values of the constructs (Hair et al. 2019). In this study, the model R^2 was 0.38. The R^2 value of 38% represents the proportion of the variation in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variables in the model. In other words, the model accounts for 38% of the actual behaviour. In this study, the VIFs for EI, EM, SERM, PRM, PR and EB were 1.726, 2.813, 1.664, 1.445, 2.276 and 2.239, respectively. These values are within the acceptable threshold of 3 and below, indicating that there were no collinearity issues in the model (Hair et al. 2019). In this study, the predictive relevance of the model was assessed using the Q^2 . The Q^2 for the endogenous variable was 0.522, which was above zero, suggesting an acceptable

TABLE 2: Quality assessment of the measurement model.

Variables	Items	Outer loadings	CA	CR	AVE
EI	EI1	0.726	0.914	0.933	0.701
	EI2	0.835	-	-	-
	EI3	0.868	-	-	-
	EI4	0.889	-	-	-
	EI5	0.840	-	-	-
	EI6	0.855	-	-	-
EB	EB1	0.783	0.868	0.898	0.561
	EB2	0.810	-	-	-
	EB3	0.830	-	-	-
	EB4	0.818	-	-	-
	EB5	0.720	-	-	-
SERM	SERM1	0.730	0.882	0.890	0.600
	SERM2	0.746	-	-	-
	SERM3	0.713	-	-	-
	SERM4	0.721	-	-	-
PRM	PRM1	0.756	0.703	0.740	0.624
	PRM2	0.859	-	-	-
	PRM3	0.750	-	-	-
PR	PR1	0.798	0.862	0.894	0.553
	PR2	0.839	-	-	-
	PR3	0.800	-	-	-
	PR4	0.819	-	-	-
EM	EM1	0.712	0.899	0.908	0.746
	EM2	0.906	-	-	-
	EM3	0.922	-	-	-
	EM4	0.898	-	-	-

EI, entrepreneurial intention; EB, entrepreneurial behaviour; SERM, successful entrepreneurial role models; EM, educators as role models; PR, peer role models; PRM, parental role models; CA, Cronbach's alpha; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted.

TABLE 3: Discriminant validity.

Constructs	EB	EI	EM	PR	PRM	SERM
EB	-	-	-	-	-	-
EI	0.751	-	-	-	-	-
EM	0.090	0.063	-	-	-	-
PR	0.385	0.486	0.285	-	-	-
PRM	0.314	0.383	0.267	0.430	-	-
SERM	0.703	0.814	0.076	0.542	0.519	-

EI, entrepreneurial intention; EB, entrepreneurial behaviour; SERM, successful entrepreneurial role models; EM, educators as role models; PR, peer role models; PRM, parental role models.

TABLE 4: Direct effects.

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	T statistics	p-value	Decision
H1	EI → EB	0.476	10.317	0.000	Accept

Control variables

1	Exper → EB	0.130	3.064	0.002	-
2	FBB → EB	0.306	2.306	0.021	-
3	Gender → EB	0.002	0.042	0.966	-
4	Age → EB	-0.218	1.251	0.211	-

Exper, previous business experience; FBB, family business background. EI, entrepreneurial intention; EB, entrepreneurial behaviour; SERM, successful entrepreneurial role models; EM, educators as role models; PR, peer role models; PRM, parental role models.

TABLE 5: Moderation analysis.

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	T statistics	p-value	Decision
H2a	PRM × EI → EB	0.058	1.180	0.238	Reject
H2b	SERM × EI → EB	0.090	2.259	0.023	Accept
H2c	PR × EI → EB	0.052	1.225	0.221	Reject
H2d	EM × EI → EB	0.074	1.624	0.104	Reject

EI, entrepreneurial intention; EB, entrepreneurial behaviour; SERM, successful entrepreneurial role models; EM, educators as role models; PR, peer role models; PRM, parental role models.

predictive relevance of the model. The significance of the hypothesised relationships was tested using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 subsamples in SMART-PLS 4. As shown in Table 4, the results show that EI significantly predicts EB ($\beta = 0.476$; $t = 10.317$; $p = 0.000$).

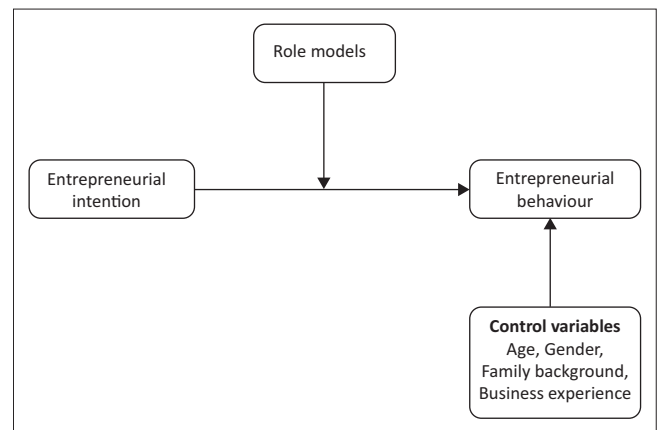
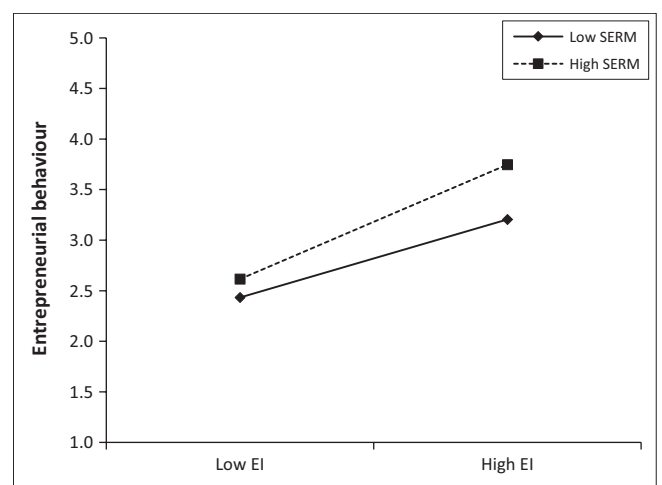
Moderation analysis

Table 5 presents findings on the moderating role of different types of entrepreneurial role models, including PRM, SERM and PR, on the association between EI and EB.

As shown in Table 5, the results showed that only SERM positively and significantly moderate the association between EI and actual behaviour ($\beta = 0.090$; $t = 2.259$; $p = 0.023$). This supported hypothesis 2b. The findings imply that SERM play a significant role in positively influencing university students to translate their EI into actual EB. On the other hand, the results showed that other types of role models, such as educators, parental and PR, are insignificant moderators of the EI–EB relationship in this study. Therefore, hypotheses H2^a, H2^c and H2^d were rejected.

Assessing the entrepreneurial intention – entrepreneurial behaviour link at different levels of successful entrepreneurial role models

We further probed the EI–EB relationship at different levels of SERM as shown in Figure 2. The findings showed that the EI–EB relationship was stronger for students with a higher

**FIGURE 1:** Conceptual model.

EI, entrepreneurial intention; SERM, successful entrepreneurial role models.

FIGURE 2: Assessing the entrepreneurial intention – entrepreneurial behaviour link at different levels of successful entrepreneurial role models.

exposure to SERM than for those with a lower exposure. This suggests that by observing and learning from the experiences of successful entrepreneurs, students can overcome fear of failure and be motivated to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Discussion

The study tested whether EI positively influences EB among university students. The results showed that EI is a significant determinant of EB. This implies that a higher level of EI increases the likelihood that students will actively engage in behaviours associated with entrepreneurship, pursue business opportunities and engage in venture creation. This underscores the importance of fostering EI as a key precursor to actual EB among students. These findings are consistent with the TPB (Ajzen 1991), which postulates that EI is a key determinant of EB. Existing studies also show that EI is a vital element in the entrepreneurial process as it predicts actual behaviour (Duong 2023; Neneh & Dzomonda 2024; Tsou et al. 2023).

The study further tested whether entrepreneurial role models positively moderate the EI–EB link. The results

showed that only SERM positively and significantly moderate the association between EI and actual behaviour. The findings imply that SERM play a significant role in positively influencing university students to translate their EI into actual EB. This is consistent with the SLT (Bandura 1977), which postulates that individuals can learn a given behaviour from those around them considered successful by observing or through vicarious learning. This finding is also consistent with other existing studies, which report that SERM enhance actual behaviour by helping nascent entrepreneurs overcome the fear of failure (Nucci et al. 2025). Furthermore, exposure to SERM fosters an entrepreneurial mindset and identity in individuals, encouraging them to take action and establish their own businesses (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021; Kong et al. 2020; Nucci et al. 2025). This suggests that students with high exposure to SERM are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities than those with low exposure, particularly in a developing country context, such as South Africa, which is characterised by a challenging entrepreneurial environment with limited institutional support for entrepreneurs (GEM 2025). This finding offers a fresh perspective that should pave the way for higher education institutions in South Africa to redesign their entrepreneurship education curriculum to incorporate SERM as guest lecturers, a view also shared by existing studies (Machingambi & Iwu 2025; Makwara et al. 2024).

Nevertheless, the results showed that other types of role models, such as PRM, PR and educators, are insignificant moderators of the EI–EB relationship among a sample of university students in a developing country context, such as South Africa. These findings differ from existing research (Bagherian et al. 2025; Maleki et al. 2023), which found that family role models influence one's decision to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Given the high failure rate of small businesses, estimated to be between 70% and 80% in South Africa (Basson & Omoruyi 2025), this implies that students with parents who are also included in this statistic of high business failure rates may have developed a heightened fear of failure and feel discouraged from starting a business, thus failing to be inspired by their parents. In support, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2025) report states that fear of failure continues to be a notorious factor hindering potential entrepreneurs from engaging in entrepreneurial activities. In terms of the insignificant effect of PR, this could be attributed to the fact that there are few young successful entrepreneurs in the country whom the students can derive inspiration from. There is a low youth participation rate in entrepreneurial activities in South Africa (GEM 2025). Lastly, the insignificant role of educators in the EI–EB is also supported by other existing studies in different contexts. For example, Diegoli et al. (2018) found that the educators were not a significant determinant of engagement in entrepreneurial activities among the surveyed students. The study further suggested that, although educators can be potential role models for their students, how they influence students to engage in entrepreneurial activities is contingent upon other

factors present in the country's entrepreneurial ecosystem. This suggests that these factors do not work in isolation but require a functional and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem characterised by access to start-up funding, a supportive policy framework, the availability of markets, a supportive culture and access to human capital (Isenberg 2011). The findings from this study offer a fresh theoretical nuance, such as differentiating how various types of role models might operate across distinct socio-economic or cultural contexts. This study found that only SERM were a significant moderator in the EI–behaviour in the context of a developing country such as South Africa, among the four hypothesised role models, therefore helping to differentiate how the different types of entrepreneurial role models work in different countries with unique sociocultural systems (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021), a perspective lacking in existing literature. On this background, our study challenges existing assumptions by demonstrating that the effect of entrepreneurial role models on students' translation of their EI into behaviour is contingent on the type of role models the student is exposed to and the context in which it occurs.

Contributions of the study

Theoretical contribution

This study offers noteworthy theoretical contributions. Firstly, combining TPB and SLT demonstrates that engaging in actual behaviour also depends on the observational and vicarious learning mechanisms emphasised by SLT, thus providing a theoretical perspective that helps bridge gaps in the existing literature by identifying role models as a boundary condition that can strengthen or weaken the EI–behaviour relationship from a developing country context. This approach enhances our understanding of why some students act on their EIs while others do not (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021), thereby providing a more contextually grounded explanation relevant to developing economies, such as South Africa.

Secondly, the study extends existing entrepreneurship literature by establishing that EI positively predicts EB among university students in South Africa. In doing so, the study addresses a notable gap in the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the EI–EB link from a developing country context. This area remains underrepresented in current entrepreneurship scholarship, as most studies have been conducted in Global North contexts.

Thirdly, this study found that only SERM were a significant moderator in the EI–behaviour in the context of a developing country such as South Africa, among the four hypothesised role models, therefore offering a fresh theoretical nuance by helping to differentiate how the different types of entrepreneurial role models work in different countries with different sociocultural systems (Abbasiachavari & Moritz 2021). In particular, this study refines the SLT by showing that the influence of role models is context-dependent, with successful role models having a stronger motivational and legitimising effect in the South African environment

characterised by a limited entrepreneurial culture, structural constraints within the higher education system and weak entrepreneurial framework conditions. The findings suggest that SERM are a vital boundary condition that helps students translate their EI into actual behaviour. These findings are particularly important in the context of South Africa, where many students are reluctant to engage in entrepreneurial activities because of fear of failure. Thus, exposure to SERM may help students develop an entrepreneurial identity, attributes and attitudes through socialisation, which shape their behaviour towards new venture creation. Essentially, our study challenges existing assumptions by demonstrating that the effect of entrepreneurial role models on students' translation of their EI into behaviour is contingent on the type of role models the student is exposed to and the context in which it occurs.

Practical contribution

Based on the findings that EI positively predicts actual EB, and that successful entrepreneurs positively moderate this relationship, several practical implications emerge. The findings underscore the importance of integrating experiential entrepreneurship programmes and mentorship opportunities into the curriculum, particularly those involving successful entrepreneurs as guest lecturers, mentors or advisers (Machingambi & Iwu 2025; Zhou et al. 2024). University students should be encouraged to engage actively with entrepreneurial ecosystems, participate in incubator programmes and seek guidance from experienced entrepreneurs to translate their intentions into action. These findings should encourage the government to develop and nurture an enabling entrepreneurial ecosystem that supports mentorship-driven start-up programmes by facilitating collaborations among educational institutions, successful entrepreneurs, business incubation hubs, banks, venture capital firms and civil society organisations. Essentially, creating a supportive policy environment that values practical entrepreneurial education and access to SERM can significantly enhance the entrepreneurial outcomes of young people.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Even though this study achieved its objectives, there are some limitations worth noting. The study was conducted using a sample of university students from one faculty, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the convenience sampling technique adopted in this study may limit the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the study was cross-sectional, limiting a nuanced understanding of how individuals translate their EI into EB over time. The study was also limited only to the impact of role models on the EI–EB link. It is essential to note that various other factors may influence this relationship. Thus, further studies may consider conducting a longitudinal study with similar variables using a sample that covers all the universities in South Africa to enhance the generalisability of the findings. As such, future studies may consider expanding the scope of this study by investigating other contextual factors present in

the entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as culture, support and the availability of markets, as potential boundary conditions necessary to understand the EI–EB relationship.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that EI is a significant predictor of actual EB among university students in a developing context such as South Africa. Moreover, the study demonstrated that the presence of SERM significantly strengthens the link between intention and action. These entrepreneurial role models serve as proof that entrepreneurial success is attainable, thereby motivating students to overcome fear, uncertainty and inertia that often hinder the transition from intention to behaviour. These findings are particularly important in the context of South Africa, a country grappling with high unemployment, persistent poverty and slow economic growth. With the prevailing high youth unemployment and a saturated formal job market, promoting student entrepreneurship offers a viable solution that not only provides financial independence for young people but also contributes to the country's long-term economic sustainability.

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Competing interests

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CRedit authorship contribution

Lupho A. Gila: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Obey Dzomonda: Conceptualisation, Software, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Brownhilder N. Neneh: Conceptualisation, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. 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.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Obey Dzomonda, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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