International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 8 Issue 32 (December 2025) PP. 327-337
DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.832022

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES (IJEMP)
www.ijemp.com

GLOBAL ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

LINKING ENTREPRENEURIAL ROLE MODELS TO ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTION IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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Article Info:

Article history:
Received date: 30.10.2025
Revised date: 16.11.2025
Accepted date: 21.12.2025
Published date: 31.12.2025

To cite this document:

Mu, Z., Che Rusuli, M. F., & Nasir, W. M. N. W. M. (2025). Linking Entrepreneurial Role Models to Entrepreneurial Intention in Entrepreneurship Education: A Conceptual Study. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices, 8* (32), 327-337.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.832022

Abstract:

Abstract: This conceptual study synthesizes how entrepreneurial role models shape students' entrepreneurial intention in higher education. Drawing on Social Learning Theory, self-efficacy theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), we propose that exposure to role models primarily operates through observational learning and identification processes that strengthen entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) and perceived behavioural control (PBC), while also influencing attitudes toward entrepreneurship and subjective norms. Prior empirical findings generally indicate a positive, predominantly indirect association between role model exposure and intention, but effect magnitudes are heterogeneous and, in some settings, direct effects are weak or non-significant once efficacy-related beliefs are considered. To address this variability, we specify boundary conditions—conceptual limits on when and for whom the proposed mechanisms operate—that are often operationalized as statistical moderators. Specifically, gender, model–observer similarity, socio-cultural and educational context, and the content/authenticity of role-model narratives are theorized to moderate distinct links in the pathway. We conclude with mechanism-based pedagogical implications and a future research agenda centered on testing moderated mediation and strengthening causal inference.

Keywords:

Entrepreneurial Role Models, Social Learning Theory, Self-Efficacy, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Perceived Behavioural Control, Entrepreneurial Intention

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Introduction

Entrepreneurial intention is the core outcome targeted by entrepreneurial education in higher education (Zhang et al., 2022 ; Nabi et al., 2017) and, within the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the most proximal antecedent of subsequent entrepreneurial behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, many universities use entrepreneurial role models (e.g., alumni founders, guest entrepreneurs, media cases) as teaching and motivational inputs (Nowiński & Haddoud, 2019; Passavanti et al., 2024). However, prior findings are heterogeneous: in some samples the association between role model exposure and intention is sizable, whereas in others it is modest, indirect, or statistically non-significant (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021). In this paper, we use an integrative theoretical lens to clarify both mechanisms and scope. We define boundary conditions as the theoretical limits that qualify when, where, and for whom the role-model mechanism is expected to hold; empirically, these boundary conditions are commonly tested as moderators in statistical models. Building on Social Learning Theory, self-efficacy theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), we synthesize evidence to explain how role models influence entrepreneurial intention in higher education and why this influence varies across learners, role-model configurations, and contexts.

Theoretical Foundations of Entrepreneurial Role Models

Social learning theory claims that individuals acquire their beliefs and behavioural repertoires at least partly by observing others who are especially salient, credible, and attainable models (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Entrepreneurship education offers role models who provide vicarious information about which entrepreneurial tasks to perform, how to deal with them, and what outcomes to expect, which shapes students' cognitive scripts and motivational beliefs through observing models (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021; Scherer et al., 1989). Crucially, Social Learning Theory predicts that modeling effects are conditional: perceived similarity and social identification should strengthen vicarious learning, whereas low identification might weaken the link between exposure and efficacy beliefs as well as intentions to act (Passavanti et al., 2024; Nowiński & Haddoud, 2019; BarNir et al., 2011). This conditionality is also consistent with the boundary conditions discussed below.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs about their capability to execute actions required to attain desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). In the entrepreneurship domain, entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) captures confidence in performing core entrepreneurial tasks (e.g., opportunity recognition, resource mobilization) and is consistently associated with stronger entrepreneurial intentions (Newman et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2005). Role models contribute to ESE primarily through vicarious experiences and social persuasion: observing similar others succeed (and observing how they cope with setbacks) can raise beliefs about one's own capability and calibrate outcome expectations (Duong et al., 2024; Lent et al., 1994; Sahid et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the strength of this vicarious pathway varies across students and contexts, reinforcing the need to specify boundary conditions.

Theory of Planned Behaviour

According to Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), an individual's entrepreneurial intention is formed by three factors: (i) attitude towards entrepreneurship, (ii) subjective norms, and (iii) perceived behavioural control (PBC). Role model exposure can affect each component in different ways. First, role models can strengthen attitudes by providing tangible results for people to observe and by highlighting personal as well as social benefits of pursuing entrepreneurial vocations (Passavanti et al., 2024; Nowiński & Haddoud,

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2019). Second, they can alter subjective norms by making it appear that certain behaviours are commonly accepted and approved by society, particularly when the models are close ties such as parents or mentors (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021; Carr & Sequeira, 2007). Third, role models can improve PBC by increasing perceived capability and controllability. More precisely, entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) is not the same as PBC: ESE refers to confidence in one's capability, whereas PBC also reflects perceived control over performing the behaviour (Nayak et al., 2024; Ajzen, 2020). This distinction is needed for interpreting empirical findings and for identifying where, in the TPB pathway, boundary conditions matter.

Mechanisms Linking Entrepreneurial Role Models to Entrepreneurial Intention

The Enhancement of Entrepreneurial Cognition

Role models can increase entrepreneurial cognition by providing students with vicarious access to entrepreneurial scripts, decision heuristics, and tasks that they would be unlikely to learn in a classroom. This exposure can reduce ambiguity and raise the sense of doability, which enhances efficacy-related beliefs that are more proximal predictors of intention (Jin et al., 2023; Kong et al., 2020). Evidence from case-based and multimedia storytelling shows that designed role-model material can improve perceived feasibility and entrepreneurial intention, but effects are sensitive to delivery formats, audiences, and how students translate these inputs into practical strategies (Dong & Bao, 2024; López-Carril et al., 2024). In short, the cognitive pathway is an antecedent to ESE/PBC rather than a stand-alone driver of intention. The next subsection will extend this logic to attitudinal formation and motivational activation.

Attitude Formation and Motivational Activation

Role models narratives and behaviours can shape students' attitudes toward entrepreneurship by influencing both evaluative judgments and affective responses. Successful role models may increase perceived desirability by communicating attainable benefits (e.g., autonomy, impact, economic returns) and by strengthening positive outcome expectancies (Li et al., 2023). At the same time, affective transmission—such as the social contagion of entrepreneurial passion—may energize motivation and interact with creativity-related cognition in predicting intentions (Alhadihaq et al., 2024; Ferreira-Neto et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2025). However, attitudinal change may be weaker in contexts where students have observed persistent entrepreneurial hardship or where local opportunity structures are constrained, suggesting that attitudes can be less malleable than efficacy beliefs in some settings (Naranjo-Valencia et al., 2025). This implies that role models may work most consistently by strengthening feasibility (ESE/PBC), with attitudes functioning as a complementary pathway. These attitudinal processes complement the social-normative channel discussed next, together shaping intention through TPB.

Subjective Norms and Perceived Social Support

Entrepreneurial decisions are situated in social environments, and for higher education students, perceived expectations from family, peers, and mentors constitute salient subjective norms (Maheshwari et al., 2023; Nessel et al., 2024; Teoh et al., 2024). Role model exposure can affect subjective norms in two ways. When the role model is a close tie (e.g., a parent, close relative, or mentor), students can infer both approval and instrumental support, which can strengthen perceived social endorsement for entrepreneurship and, in turn, increase ESE/PBC and intention (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021; Carr & Sequeira, 2007; Gonzalez-Tamayo et al., 2024; Maziriri et al., 2024). By contrast, when the role model is a weak tie or a media figure, normative influence is likely to be weaker and depends on whether entrepreneurship is portrayed as a socially respected and institutionally legitimate pursuit.

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In line with this distinction, exposure to famous entrepreneurs can contribute to a broader pro-entrepreneurship climate, which may increase perceived social legitimacy, particularly in collectivistic cultures where others' approval is important for intention (Chin et al., 2024; Nessel et al., 2024). However, normative influence may still vary across contexts: in communities that are neutral toward entrepreneurship and where perceived risk is high, role models may be especially important for strengthening subjective norms. Overall, the subjective-norm pathway is context-dependent and often operates alongside efficacy-related beliefs.

Self-Efficacy and Perceived Behavioural Control

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) refers to individuals' beliefs about their capability to perform entrepreneurial tasks. Perceived behavioural control (PBC) refers to individuals' perceptions of the controllability of performing entrepreneurial behaviour, including perceived constraints and enabling conditions (Ajzen, 2020; Nayak et al., 2024). With respect to ESE, it is among the most frequently occurring mechanisms through which role models affect entrepreneurial intention across studies (Wu et al., 2022). From a social cognitive viewpoint, vicarious experiences derived from observing similar others' successes can boost ESE. Role models may also enhance PBC by signaling ways to acquire resources, cope with challenges, and access networks, thereby increasing perceived controllability (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021; Jin et al., 2023). However, the magnitude of these effects differs across studies, and some evidence shows that role-model exposure mainly affects intentions through efficacy-related beliefs rather than through a stable direct effect. Therefore, ESE and PBC are key mediators whose effects are likely to be conditional on boundary conditions. Moreover, role models may also operate through identity and risk-appraisal processes, as well as the core mediators.

Additional Psychological Mechanisms

There are also role-model mechanisms beyond the main constructs of TPB, which may affect intention via identity- and risk-related processes, and interact with ESE/PBC. First, admiration for specific role models may help in the formation of an entrepreneurial self-identity, which might increase the likelihood of intention by making entrepreneurship seem like a more plausible and desirable future self (Mei & Symaco, 2022 ; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Second, role models who tell stories that openly acknowledge setbacks and the recoveries from them may recalibrate perceptions of risk and failure. These authentic accounts can reduce unrealistic optimism and, depending on how they are framed, can either temporarily decrease intention (by making risk more salient) or increase long-term PBC by clarifying controllable actions and coping resources (Alvarado Valenzuela et al., 2023; Dong & Bao, 2024; Passavanti et al., 2024). These other mechanisms underscore how vital narratives and the match between audience members and role models are in role-model interventions.

Analysis of Boundary Conditions

Entrepreneurial role models do not affect all students equally. In this paper, the boundary conditions refer to conceptual qualifications that determine when the role-model pathway would be expected to be stronger or weaker. In empirical work, these boundary conditions are usually tested as moderators that change the strength of certain links in the mechanism. The following are brief subsections on four frequently examined boundary conditions (gender, model-observer similarity, socio-cultural and educational context, and narrative content/authenticity) and what mechanism component is most likely to be affected.

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Gender Differences

Gender is an important boundary condition since gendered stereotypes and opportunities could shape both identification with role models as well as what is deemed feasible for entrepreneurship (Passavanti et al., 2024; Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021 ; Díaz-García & Jiménez-Moreno, 2010). Many studies suggest that, on average, compared with male students, female students have larger gains in ESE when exposed to a female or gender-congruent role model; these gains are linked to greater entrepreneurial intentions for women than for men (BarNir et al., 2011; Passavanti et al., 2024). Theoretically, gender-congruent models can break down stereotype-based limits and boost vicarious efficacy, thereby strengthening the chain between role model exposure and ESE, and through increased perceived feasibility, boost PBC and intention (Stoker et al., 2024). At the same time, it is also unlikely that gender effects are universal; when entrepreneurship is heavily gender-biased or there is little institutional support for women, role models may increase subjective norms and the perceived legitimacy of entrepreneurship without increasing PBC. This mixed pattern implies that gender mostly qualifies the exposure-to-ESE/PBC path through identification and stereotype-related constraints. Gender, taken together with the other boundary conditions, highlights that the identity of the model matters because it helps determine how observational learning translates into perceived feasibility for the observer, which leads to broader considerations of similarity.

Model–Observer Similarity

Model–observer similarity refers to how much students feel a role model is similar and reachable on dimensions such as education, discipline, financial resources, and culture. As per Social Learning Theory, higher perceived similarity would strengthen both identification and the diagnostic value of vicarious experiences, thus amplifying the effect of role-model exposure on ESE and consequently on intention (Bosma et al., 2012; Passavanti et al., 2024). But there are multiple dimensions of similarity, and it is not a straightforward effect. Highly prestigious or distant models might improve attitudes (desirability) by making the status of entrepreneurship seem higher but do less to affect ESE/PBC if students believe the accomplishments to be unattainable. Empirical work also distinguishes between direct role models (e.g., strong ties such as parents, relatives, and mentors) and indirect role models (public figures, media cases). With direct models, role models can provide both vicarious learning and support that strengthens PBC through perceived access to resources. Indirect models tend to rely more on narratives that can increase perceived attainability. Overall, similarity is most plausibly understood as a moderator of both the exposure-to-observational-learning link and the exposure-to-ESE/PBC link. This focus on perceived attainability logically leads to context playing a role in what feels doable.

Socio-Cultural and Educational Context

Socio-cultural and educational context qualifies role-model effects through normative climates, opportunity structures, and perceived constraints. In societies where entrepreneurship is viewed as culturally legitimate and publicly valuable, and where role models are visible, role-model exposure is more likely to manifest as more supportive subjective norms and positive attitudes (Wennberg et al., 2013). Within higher education, the strength of the campus entrepreneurial ecosystem, access to incubators/mentoring, and the visibility of entrepreneurial career paths can further shape how role models matter by making those resources and connections feel more available (Portyanko et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023). In resource-constrained communities where students witness entrepreneurial hardship, role models may find it difficult to change beliefs quickly; they may primarily influence subjective norms and support ESE through coping-related information (Naranjo-Valencia et al., 2025). Context also shapes how gender is related:

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some settings are deeply woven with family-based role models shaped by gendered work, which might limit how much exposure feels like a choice that students can control (Moreno-Gómez et al., 2020). In short, context most powerfully moderates the exposure-to-subjective-norms and exposure-to-PBC linkages by changing social legitimacy and perceived constraints, which in turn shape how students attend to narratives about what is feasible within those constraints.

Content and Authenticity of Role-Model Narratives

The authenticity and content of role-model narratives also constitute a boundary condition because narratives determine how students understand outcomes, risks, and controllability. Success stories can boost desirability and raise ESE, as well as provide coping scripts that fortify realistic PBC by making it clear what can be controlled and how recovery is possible (Aadland & Aaboen, 2020; Lattacher & Wdowiak, 2020; Mueller & Shepherd, 2016). The empirical evidence is mixed: some suggest that emphasizing failure can increase risk salience and reduce short-term intention, but well-framed success stories can boost intention and ESE through an aspirational but credible role model (F. Liu et al., 2019; Laviolette et al., 2012). Thus, narrative effects are best understood as contingent on framing and credibility. If stories seem implausible or overly heroic, students may ignore them, diminishing vicarious learning and the exposure-to-ESE/PBC link. Therefore, a portfolio of balanced narratives of credible success and recovery stories can support both motivational and calibrating functions. Such a portfolio would align desirability (attitudes) with PBC (feasibility). This narrative boundary condition helps explain why role-model interventions yield widely varying outcomes.

In sum, boundary conditions exist at several levels: individual variables (gender), relational aspects (perceived similarity, tie strength), context factors (cultural legitimacy, institutional support), and narrative design (authenticity, success–failure ratio). Crucially, such factors do not only affect whether a role-model intervention "works"; they also determine which mechanisms are active and the extent to which exposure to the role model boosts ESE, PBC, subjective norms, and attitudes. The following section draws pedagogical implications and a research agenda from these mechanism-based qualifiers.

Pedagogical Implications

The above mechanism-based synthesis means that role-model interventions in entrepreneurship education are best when they are designed to promote observational learning and identification, and when they also result in stronger feasibility beliefs (ESE and PBC) as well as supportive subjective norms and attitudes. The implications below are intended for a higher education setting and for early-stage students with limited firsthand entrepreneurial experience. These implications are particularly diagnostic for the type of vicarious learning one might experience as an early-stage student.

First, role-model selection can be aligned with identification. Curate a varied portfolio of role models across different venture stages, industries, and demographic categories, such as alumni founders, local SME entrepreneurs, social venture leaders, female entrepreneurs, and related categories, which increases the likelihood that different student groups will encounter at least one model they perceive as attainable. This is a direct intervention in the exposure-to-identification pathway, so it is expected to increase vicarious experiences, which increase ESE and thus (indirectly) PBC and intention.

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Second, instructional design can be used to manage perceived similarity and psychological nearness. Educators should not depend on the general type of "celebrity entrepreneur" examples but instead match role-model examples with students' disciplinary backgrounds and career aspirations (e.g., technology commercialization cases for engineering students; business-model innovation cases for business students; mission-driven cases for students oriented towards social impact). Doing so would raise the usefulness of the model's actions and coping strategies, which is thought to help observational learning and translate exposure into ESE. In contexts where material scarcity is salient (e.g., in a resource-scarce area), students are likely to feel more motivated by focusing on specific ways to cope and obtain resources, rather than solely by being inspired.

Third, role-model pedagogy turns inspiration into controllable action. In evidence-supported formats, this includes guided case discussions, simulations, role-plays, and structured interaction with entrepreneurs (Q&A, mentoring), which require students to state particular, transferable actions (Dong & Bao, 2024; López-Carril et al., 2024). In practice, this activity makes it visible what the model does and helps the student to map the story onto their own constraints and thus reinforces PBC by increasing perceived control as well as ESE by practicing a specific task.

Fourth, narrative balance can calibrate risk perception without undermining feasibility. For early cohorts, using credible success stories mixed with recovery-from-failure stories may give students more realistic outcome expectations and maintain their motivation. When using failure narratives, the framing can focus on controllable lessons (decision traps, resource deficits, coping responses) to bolster PBC, as opposed to failure being viewed as an inescapable conclusion. This is particularly important where students' prior experiences with entrepreneurship have been predominantly negative, as it aligns desirability (attitudes) with feasibility (ESE/PBC) and prevents overgeneralising from successful exceptions. These pedagogical implications also motivate focused research agendas on which design features are most effective at activating the proposed mechanisms.

Research Recommendations

Future studies can strengthen this literature if they move from descriptive comparisons to tests of the integrated model in a moderated-mediation framework. Priorities include longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or randomized designs to establish temporal ordering from exposure to role models, to observational learning and identification, and then to ESE and PBC, to intention and behaviour. Researchers should measure ESE and PBC separately and state which construct is targeted by each intervention component; for example, narrative content may influence PBC via perceived controllability, whereas perceived similarity may impact ESE through vicarious capability beliefs. Researchers should also model interactions among different boundary conditions, rather than attributing effects to one moderator in isolation. In addition, comparing narrative types (success/failure/recovery) and delivery modes (in-person guests/video cases/digital platforms) will show when framing and authenticity strengthen, weaken, or reverse efficacy-related paths. Finally, research should extend outcomes beyond intentions by incorporating opportunity recognition, venture entry, and persistence, and assess whether effects differ between early-stage versus more advanced student participants.

Conclusion

This conceptual study integrates Social Learning Theory and TPB to explain how entrepreneurial role models influence students' entrepreneurial intention in higher education.

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The central claim is that role-model exposure operates primarily through observational learning and identification processes that strengthen feasibility beliefs—ESE and PBC—while also shaping attitudes and subjective norms. Heterogeneity in prior findings is therefore expected when boundary conditions alter which mechanism link is activated and how strongly exposure translates into feasibility, norms, and desirability. Our theoretical contribution is the specification of boundary conditions as qualifiers of distinct links in the mechanism, providing a structured explanation for why role-model interventions yield mixed effects across studies. By distinguishing boundary conditions (conceptual scope limits) from moderators (their empirical operationalisation), and by linking gender, similarity, context, and narrative design to ESE, PBC, and subjective norms, the paper offers a testable framework that aligns Social Learning Theory with TPB. The proposed framework is intended to generalise primarily to higher-education entrepreneurship education contexts in which students have limited entrepreneurial experience and role-model exposure is a designed pedagogical input. Generalisation to other populations (e.g., experienced entrepreneurs, non-student adults) and to markedly different institutional or cultural settings is best treated as an empirical question, and causal claims are best reserved for studies that directly test the temporal and conditional structure of the model.

Acknowledgement
The author would like to express his gratitude to all the authors involved in his study. Many thanks are also extended to the publisher who published this article as additional reference material for other researchers.

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International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 8 Issue 32 (December 2025) PP. 327-337
DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.832022
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