Bridging the Intention–Action Gap through Entrepreneurial Optimism: A Conceptual Exploration

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ABSTRACT

The importance of entrepreneurial intention has been widely recognised as veritable and reliable predictor of entrepreneurial action, However, many individuals who intend to start businesses fail to act accordingly. This problem, known as the intention–action gap, has become a major concern in entrepreneurship studies. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and positive psychology, this conceptual paper explores entrepreneurial optimism as a moderating variable that can bridge this intention-action gap. Entrepreneurial optimism can be defined as a positive cognitive bias toward expecting favorable outcomes thereby enhancing persistence, confidence, and resilience under uncertainty. This study integrates TPB with psychological capital theory to propose a model in which optimism strengthens the relationship between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial action. The By synthesized insights from recent and established studies, this study extends TPB's explanatory power and offers a more psychologically grounded understanding of entrepreneurial action. The paper also outlines implications for entrepreneurship education and policy in developing economies like Nigeria, particularly regarding programs that inculcate and cultivate optimism among young entrepreneurs. The paper concludes with calls for empirical validation to further examine optimism's moderating role and other psychological factors in the intention–action relationship.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial optimism, Theory of Planned Behavior, Intention–Action Gap, Entrepreneurial Action, Psychological Capital

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship plays a major role in employment generation and economic transformation, specifically in developing countries (Akinwale & Adepoju, 2021). However, despite strong entrepreneurial intentions among young individuals, only a small number translate these intentions into actual action of starting a business. This problem commonly known as intention–action gap signifies a serious challenge to promoting and understanding of entrepreneurial action (Kautonen, van Gelderen & Fink, 2015; Neneh, 2022).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) provides one of the most widely used frameworks for predicting entrepreneurial intentions. It posits that attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) influence the intention to act, which in turn predicts behavior. However, empirical findings show that intentions do not always lead to entrepreneurial action (Shirokova, Osiyevskyy & Bogatyreva, 2018). Therefore, scholars have called for integrating psychological constructs to explain why some individuals act while others hesitate (Campos, Frese & Gielnik, 2022; Schlaegel & Koenig, 2014).

Entrepreneurial optimism, derived from positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and conceptualized as part of psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan & Avolio, 2019), offers a promising extension. Entrepreneurial optimism shapes how entrepreneurs interpret risk, setbacks and opportunities thereby enhancing perseverance and confidence (Hmieleski & Lerner, 2020; Olawale & Garwe, 2023). This paper argues that optimism strengthens the link between intention and action by empowering individuals to overcome uncertainty and obstacles typical of new venture creation.

Although this model is broadly applicable, the study contributes conceptually by integrating entrepreneurial optimism into the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) within the specific context of cooperative studies students in Northern Nigeria. Unlike prior intention–behavior studies that focused mainly on cognitive determinants. This paper introduces an affective motivational dimension that explains why intentions fail to translate into concrete entrepreneurial action. A deeper understanding of psychological mechanisms such as optimism can enhance this transition, which is essential for fostering entrepreneurship economic growth in developing countries like Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of Planned Behavior and Entrepreneurship

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen (1991), is one of the most widely used framework in entrepreneurship research, offering a good explanation of how individual attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control shape entrepreneurial intentions and subsequent action/behavior. TPB explains that, behavior is determined primarily by an individual’s intention to perform that behavior, which subsequently influenced by attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC). TPB extends the initial Theory of Reasoned Action, recognizing that individuals often encounter limitations in volitional control and that behavioral performance depends not only on motivation but also on perceived ability and opportunity. Within entrepreneurship, TPB provides a solid foundation for examining how personal beliefs and perceived capabilities translate into the desire to engage in venture creation or entrepreneurial action (Ajzen, 2020; Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000).

TPB has been widely validated for many years as a reliable model for predicting entrepreneurial intention across different educational backgrounds, contexts and cultures (Nowiński et al., 2019; Liñán & Fayolle, 2015). However, study finding indicates that while the theory effectively explains intention formation, it falls short in predicting actual entrepreneurial behavior, giving rise to what scholars describe as the intention–action gap (Kautonen, van Gelderen, & Fink, 2015). Many individuals show strong entrepreneurial intentions but fail to take the actual steps toward establishing a business, implying that intention alone does not confirm action. These inconsistencies have prompted scholars to call for theoretical extensions that incorporate psychological, situational, and contextual variables thereby influencing the translation of intention into action or behavior (Fayolle & Liñán, 2014; Gorgievski & Stephan, 2016).

Several studies reveals that psychological resources such as optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy play an important role in stimulating the relationship between intention and behavior (Campos, Frese, & Gielnik, 2022; Newman, Obschonka, Schwarz, Cohen, & Nielsen, 2019). For instance, Neneh (2022) found that entrepreneurial self-efficacy and situational support significantly predict whether students who intend to start a business actually act upon it. Similarly, Shirokova, Osiyevskyy, and Bogatyreva (2018) emphasized that individual traits and environmental support systems together influence the conversion of entrepreneurial intention into action. These insights indicated that motivational and cognitive factors are important in addressing inertia, uncertainty, and fear linked to entrepreneurial activity (Sheeran & Webb, 2016).

To address this gap, researchers have advocated integrating TPB with positive psychology constructs such as psychological capital (PsyCap), a higher-order construct including hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007; Newman et al., 2014). Among these, optimism has received increasing attention as a potential moderating factor in entrepreneurial action because it reflects a person’s general expectation that future outcomes will be positive. Optimistic entrepreneurs are more likely to persist in the face of uncertainty, reinterpret challenges as temporary, and maintain confidence that their efforts will yield success (Raeis, Ghorbani, & Taghipour, 2024; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2019; Hmieleski & Lerner, 2020). These features makes optimism an essential psychological instrument that can stimulate persistence and proactive behavior, thus narrowing the intention–behavior gap.

Nevertheless, this paper conceptualizes entrepreneurial optimism as a moderator within the TPB framework, influencing the strength and consistency of the relationship between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial action. This extension aligns with the emerging consensus in entrepreneurship research that integrating cognitive-behavioral models with psychological resource theories offers a richer understanding of entrepreneurial action (Yasir & Majid, 2023; Hmieleski & Lerner, 2020; Otache, 2024). Incorporating optimism not only enhances the explanatory power of TPB but also provides actionable implications for entrepreneurship educators and policymakers aiming to foster resilient and proactive entrepreneurs, particularly among cooperative studies students in Northern Nigeria.

Critique of Prior Theoretical Models

While the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; 2020) and Psychological Capital Theory (Luthans et al., 2007) have been instrumental in explaining entrepreneurial intention and action, prior studies have tended to apply these frameworks descriptively, often without interrogating their conceptual boundaries or contextual assumptions. For example, most applications of TPB assume a rational decision-making process, however, entrepreneurial behavior is also driven by affective and cognitive biases such as optimism, overconfidence, and perceived feasibility that TPB alone may not capture (Gorgievski & Stephan, 2016; Sheeran & Webb, 2016).

Additionally, research on Psychological Capital (PsyCap) frequently treats optimism as a stable, positive trait rather than a dynamic moderator that can alter behavioral relationships (Newman et al., 2019). This has limited the theoretical development of optimism as an interactive psychological mechanism capable of influencing the strength of intention–action links. Moreover, earlier studies rarely questioned whether optimism functions uniformly across cultures, despite evidence that collectivist or uncertainty-averse environments, such as those in developing economies may alter how optimism affects entrepreneurial action (Yasir & Majid, 2023).

This study contributes by moving beyond descriptive validation of TPB and PsyCap, offering a theoretically grounded extension that positions entrepreneurial optimism as a moderating construct, rather than merely a positive disposition.

Entrepreneurial Optimism and the Intention–Action Gap

Optimism is a central construct in positive psychology, representing a generalized expectation that good things will happen in the future (Carver & Scheier, 2014). Within the entrepreneurial context, optimism refers to a positive cognitive evaluation of potential business outcomes and challenges, influencing how individuals perceive risks and persist toward their goals (Hmieleski & Lerner, 2020). Entrepreneurs who exhibit high optimism tend to interpret obstacles as temporary and controllable rather than permanent or overwhelming. This cognitive orientation fosters persistence and opportunity recognition, especially in uncertain environments where external support and predictability are limited (Campos, Frese, & Gielnik, 2022; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2019).

The role of optimism in entrepreneurship has attracted the attention of scholars because of its importance in explaining why individuals with similar intentions display different behavioral outcomes. Optimism helps in motivational persistence, self-regulatory focus, and emotional resilience, which are essential for bridging the intention–action gap (Neneh, 2022; Gorgievski & Stephan, 2016). According to Psychological Capital (PsyCap) theory, optimism is one of four key psychological resources. These key psychological resources includes hope, self-efficacy, and resilience which assist individuals to overcome challenges and pursue goals with sustained effort (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007). Empirical studies confirm that optimism significantly predicts entrepreneurial success, innovation, and venture survival (Yasir & Majid, 2023; Hmieleski & Lerner, 2020).

Similarly, various studies have identified optimism as a moderating or mediating variable that shapes how intention translates into entrepreneurial action. For instance, Raeis, Ghorbani, and Taghipour (2024) found that optimism mediated the relationship between psychological capital and entrepreneurial behavior, suggesting that optimism enhances proactive tendencies and risk-taking. Similarly, Newman et al. (2019) reported that entrepreneurs high in optimism were more likely to act upon their intentions because they perceived fewer psychological and environmental barriers. This aligns with the self-regulatory perspective that optimistic individuals exhibit stronger goal commitment and persistence in the face of adversity (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010).

Optimism also interacts with cognitive processes associated with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). While TPB emphasizes attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as determinants of intention and behavior, optimism strengthens these relationships by enhancing confidence in expected outcomes. Optimistic individuals tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward entrepreneurship, perceive greater control over business outcomes, and reduce social discouragement (Ajzen, 2020; van Gelderen, Kautonen, & Fink, 2018). Optimism can therefore be seen as psychological amplifier that stimulates the stability and enactment of entrepreneurial intentions.

However, the role of optimism is not universally positive. Excessive optimism may lead to overconfidence bias and unrealistic expectations, potentially resulting in poor judgment and resource misallocation (Hmieleski & Baron, 2009; Trevelyan, 2016). The challenge, therefore, lies in distinguishing between functional optimism—which promotes adaptive motivation—and dysfunctional optimism, which can undermine rational decision-making. Recent literature emphasizes maintaining a balance between optimism and critical realism to ensure sound entrepreneurial decisions (Yasir & Majid, 2023). Therefore, optimism should moderate not excessive.

In a nutshell, entrepreneurial optimism serves as a vital psychological mechanism that may moderate the link between intention and behavior. It provides the emotional energy and cognitive confidence required to transform entrepreneurial plans into action. Its particularly relevant in developing contexts characterized by uncertainty and limited institutional support. Thus, extending the Theory of Planned Behavior to include entrepreneurial optimism as a moderating construct offers a theoretically grounded pathway to explain why some individuals act on their intentions while others do not. This integration bridges motivational and psychological perspectives, enriching the predictive validity of TPB within entrepreneurship studies.

Although optimism generally enhances persistence, excessive optimism can lead to cognitive bias, unrealistic planning, and misallocation of resources (Hmieleski & Baron, 2009; Trevelyan, 2016). Therefore, optimism should be understood as a bounded psychological resource whose adaptive function depends on the balance between confidence and critical realism. In high-uncertainty settings such as Northern Nigeria, optimism may also interact with cultural norms emphasizing community support and shared responsibility, which can shape how entrepreneurs interpret risk and success.

Recognizing these cultural and contextual nuances enhances the applicability of the proposed model and avoids the assumption that optimism operates uniformly across societies. Thus, this conceptual paper not only underscores the enabling potential of optimism but also highlights its situational limits.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

Theoretical Integration

The proposed framework integrates the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and Psychological Capital (PsyCap) theory (Luthans et al., 2007) within the broader lens of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). TPB provides a well-established foundation for explaining how attitude toward entrepreneurship, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) collectively determine entrepreneurial intention, which in turn predicts entrepreneurial action. However, research consistently shows that intention alone does not always translate into behavior, producing what scholars term the intention–action gap (Kautonen et al., 2015; Shirokova et al., 2018).

This study argues that the gap arises partly from volitional and emotional limitations within the TPB model, which focuses on rational cognition but underrepresents motivational and affective forces that sustain goal pursuit under uncertainty. Thus, the integration of PsyCap theory enriches TPB by introducing emotional self-regulation and motivational persistence as psychological mechanisms influencing behavior.

Within PsyCap, optimism represents a future-oriented expectation of favorable outcomes, enabling individuals to sustain motivation and confidence even when facing uncertainty (Luthans et al., 2019). Optimism strengthens perceived behavioral control by reinforcing the belief that desired outcomes are attainable despite barriers, and it enhances self-regulation by helping individuals reinterpret setbacks as temporary and manageable. Therefore,

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optimism can function as a moderating variable between intention and action, increasing the likelihood that individuals with strong entrepreneurial intentions actually engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Furthermore, optimism complements the cognitive assumptions of TPB with emotional readiness, bridging the motivational gap that often prevents intentions from materializing. The framework thus conceptualizes entrepreneurial optimism as a psychological amplifier that energizes the pathway from entrepreneurial intention to entrepreneurial action.

Conceptual Model

Figure 1.0 depicts the integrated framework. The left section represents the TPB core components—attitude toward entrepreneurship, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control, all influencing entrepreneurial intention. Entrepreneurial optimism moderates the path between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial action, implying that individuals with higher optimism are more likely to act upon their entrepreneurial intentions than those with lower optimism.

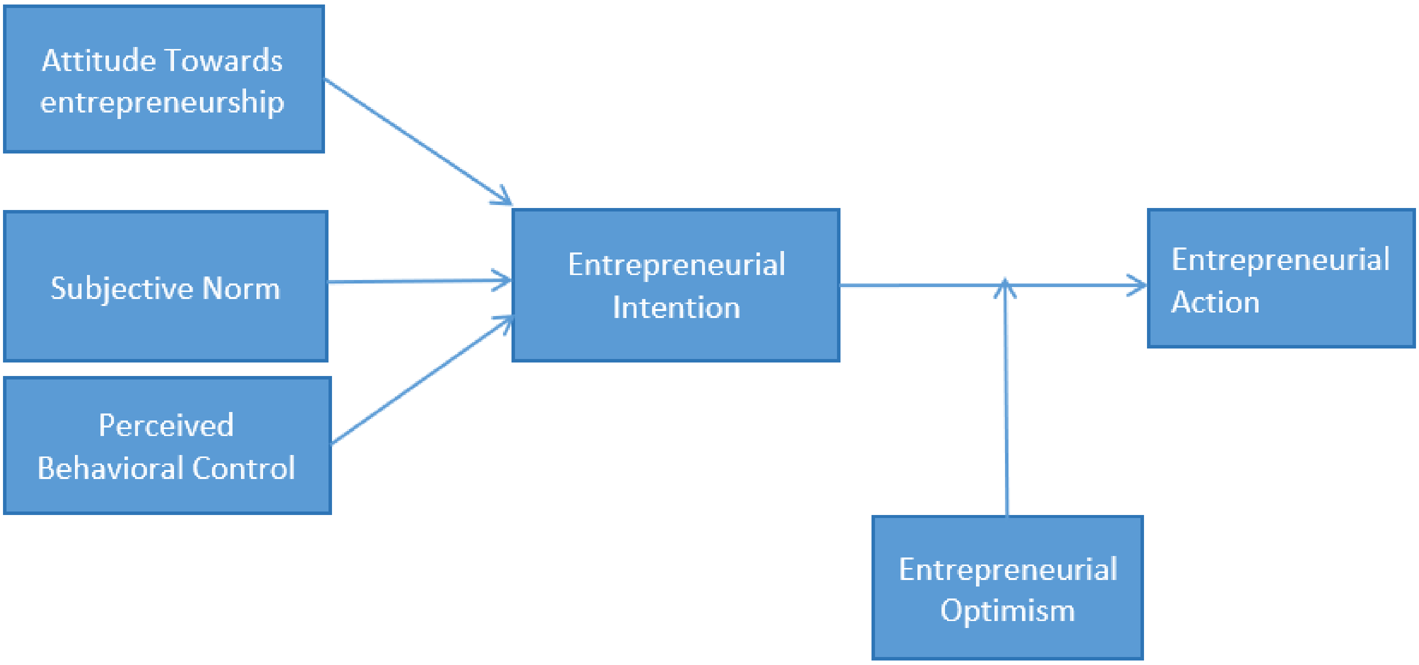

Figure 1.0: Conceptual framework integrating entrepreneurial optimism as a moderating construct within the Theory of Planned Behavior, illustrating how optimism enhances the translation of entrepreneurial intention into entrepreneurial action.

Theoretical Logic and Justification

Logically, this integration rests on three foundations:

1. Cognitive–Affective Complementarity: While TPB explains how rational cognition forms intention, PsyCap contributes affective elements such as optimism that influence persistence and goal enactment (Newman et al., 2019).

2. Volitional Control and Self-Regulation: Intention requires volitional effort to become action. Optimism enhances volition by reinforcing goal commitment and reducing avoidance behavior in uncertain contexts (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Raeis et al., 2024).

3. Contextual Adaptability: In developing economies like Northern Nigeria, entrepreneurs face structural uncertainty. Optimism provides psychological resilience, helping individuals act despite limited external support or institutional stability.

The present model contributes conceptually by deepening the explanatory logic of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) through the integration of entrepreneurial optimism as a moderating variable. While prior TPB-based studies (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Kautonen et al., 2015) have effectively predicted entrepreneurial intention, their ability to explain why intentions often fail to translate into action remains limited. This conceptual model advances TPB by introducing a motivational–affective mechanism—entrepreneurial optimism—that operates at the volitional stage between intention and behavior. Unlike traditional cognitive constructs, optimism sustains persistence, reinforces perceived behavioral control, and buffers against discouragement when external or situational barriers arise (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Luthans et al., 2019).

Theoretically, this framework bridges cognitive intention models with positive psychology, creating a dual-process understanding in which emotional energy and expectancy beliefs complement rational decision-making. This integration adds novelty by emphasizing the psychological endurance required to execute entrepreneurial goals, particularly in resource-constrained and uncertain environments like Northern Nigeria. Furthermore, by positioning optimism as a bounded construct—adaptive when balanced with critical realism (Hmieleski & Baron, 2009; Trevelyan, 2016)—the model also acknowledges potential cultural and contextual limitations. Thus, the model contributes not merely by adding a variable, but by reframing the intention–action process as both cognitive and motivational, expanding the theoretical depth of TPB in entrepreneurship research.

Propositions

P1: Entrepreneurial intention positively influences entrepreneurial action.

P2: Entrepreneurial optimism moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial action, strengthening it under high optimism.

P3: Integrating entrepreneurial optimism into TPB increases its explanatory power for predicting entrepreneurial action.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual design, relying solely on secondary sources. Relevant literature published between 2015 and 2025 was reviewed from reputable databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus and Emerald Insight. The review focused on studies related to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; 2020), entrepreneurial optimism, and the intention–behavior gap. The conceptual framework was developed through the integration of TPB and Psychological Capital Theory (Luthans et al., 2007; 2019), following guidelines for conceptual development by Whetten (1989) and Jaakkola (2020). The outcome is a theoretical model proposing entrepreneurial optimism as a moderator between entrepreneurial intention and action.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Entrepreneurial optimism provides a psychological bridge between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial action. Optimists tend to interpret obstacles as manageable, maintain motivation in uncertainty, and recover quickly from the possible setbacks (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Luthans et al., 2019).

Theoretically, this paper extends TPB by introducing a motivational component from positive psychology. Practically, encouraging optimism in entrepreneurship education can strengthen students' capacity to execute business ideas (Otache, 2024). Educators can incorporate reflection, mentoring, and experiential learning to enhance positive expectancy and resilience.

Additionally, Policy interventions should support programs that develop psychological capital like optimism among youth entrepreneurs. Even though this approach is not limited to only developing economies, it is particularly relevant in developing economies like Nigeria where structural barriers discourage action despite high entrepreneurial intentions. Especially, for Cooperative Studies Students in Northern Nigeria, entrepreneurship education programs can integrate psychological capital development, particularly optimism training, to help students sustain motivation and confidence in uncertain environments. Inculcating such initiatives within the tertiary institutions curricula may enhance graduates' ability to translate intention into real entrepreneurial activities.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This conceptual paper proposes that entrepreneurial optimism moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial action, thereby bridging the intention–action gap. The study contributes to theory by extending TPB through the inclusion of optimism, a core element of psychological capital.

Future research should empirically test the proposed model using data from various regions and entrepreneurship education contexts. Studies can include other psychological factors such as hope, resilience, and self-efficacy to compare their moderating effects on intention and action. Researchers may also explore gender and cultural differences in optimism's influence on entrepreneurship behavior.

By fostering optimism and resilience, entrepreneurship education can shift from teaching what to do toward empowering how to persist, turning entrepreneurial intention into concrete entrepreneurial action.

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