

# A Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among University Students: Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainable entrepreneurship has gained increasing attention as a means of addressing economic, social, and environmental challenges while promoting sustainable development. In this context, understanding university students' Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention is important, as intention represents an important precursor to future entrepreneurial behaviour. This conceptual study aims to develop an extended framework to explain Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among university students in Malaysia. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the proposed framework incorporates Attitude and Subjective Norms as core determinants of intention and extends the theory by incorporating Self-Efficacy and Sustainability Orientation. The inclusion of Self-Efficacy reflects the importance of students' confidence in their ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities, while Sustainability Orientation captures their inclination to consider sustainability-related concerns in entrepreneurial decision-making. The conceptual framework is developed through the synthesis of relevant theoretical perspectives and previous empirical studies on sustainable entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial intention. The proposed framework suggests that Attitude, Subjective Norms, Self-Efficacy, and Sustainability Orientation may contribute to the formation of Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among university students. The study contributes theoretically by extending the TPB framework to incorporate individual capability and sustainability-oriented considerations within the context of sustainable entrepreneurship. Practically, the framework provides a basis for higher education institutions to develop educational and experiential initiatives that can foster students' intention to pursue sustainable entrepreneurial activities. Future empirical research is recommended to validate the proposed relationships among university students in Malaysian higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention, Theory of Planned Behavior, Attitude, Subjective Norms, Self-Efficacy, Sustainability Orientation, University Students

## INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has traditionally been recognised as an important driver of economic development through business creation, innovation, employment and income generation, with conventional entrepreneurship largely emphasising economic value, profitability and business performance (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; Neumann, 2021). However, entrepreneurial activities can also generate unintended social and environmental consequences. These include income and wealth inequalities, unequal access to opportunities and resources, exploitation of labour, excessive consumption of natural resources, pollution, waste generation and environmental degradation (Neumann, 2021; Dean & McMullen, 2007). These concerns have broadened the role of entrepreneurship beyond economic returns, giving rise to sustainable entrepreneurship, which integrates economic, social and environmental considerations into entrepreneurial activities (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018; Terán-Yépez et al., 2020). By balancing these three dimensions, sustainable entrepreneurship can contribute to more inclusive economic development, responsible resource use and long-term societal well-being.

Sustainable entrepreneurship (SE) is closely aligned with the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Malaysia as it brings together economic development, social well-being and environmental sustainability. In Malaysia, SE is becoming increasingly relevant to the country's development agenda. The Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025) highlights green growth, environmental sustainability and the development of innovative and sustainable entrepreneurs (Ministry of Economy Malaysia, 2021). This shows that sustainability is gradually becoming part of Malaysia's entrepreneurship agenda.

Malaysia certainly aims to produce more sustainable entrepreneurs. Malaysia's commitment to developing sustainable entrepreneurship is reflected in its National Entrepreneurship Policies (NEP). The National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030 (NEP 2030) places entrepreneurship within an agenda of inclusive, balanced and sustainable socio-economic development, while the Social Entrepreneurship Blueprint 2030 (SEMy2030) explicitly promotes entrepreneurial activities that address social and environmental challenges. However, despite various government initiatives, such as the HEI Entrepreneurship Action Plan 2021–2025, entrepreneurship remains a less preferred career path among students and graduates, highlighting the need for further attention. In fact, statistics from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) indicate that in 2024, 86.4% of employed graduates fell into the "employee" category, while only 7.2% were self-employed. While these figures do not directly measure SEI, the pattern suggests that entrepreneurship is not yet a primary career path for most Malaysian graduates. Thus, it is important to better understand the factors that encourage students to consider entrepreneurship as a future career path.

This becomes even more important in the context of sustainable entrepreneurship, as it requires individuals to consider economic, social, and environmental dimensions simultaneously. Questions therefore arise as to whether university students have developed a strong sustainability orientation and whether sustainability considerations are sufficiently embedded in their entrepreneurial values, mindset, and intentions to pursue sustainable business activities.

A study conducted among 507 students at a Malaysian public university found that 40.7% of students had insufficient knowledge of sustainable development, while final-year students demonstrated higher levels of sustainability awareness, attitudes, and actions than first- and second-year students (Michael et al., 2020). Although the study did not specifically examine sustainability orientation its findings indicate variations in students' sustainability-related awareness, attitudes, and actions across their university experience. This provides a relevant basis for examining Sustainability Orientation as a broader sustainability-related factor that may influence students' Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention.

Nevertheless, existing research in the Malaysian context has predominantly examined factors such as attitude, perceived behavioural control, subjective norms, educational support, sustainability awareness, green curriculum exposure, and self-efficacy in explaining students' green or sustainable entrepreneurial intention (Loon & Nordin, 2020; Chan et al., 2025). However, the influence of student's Sustainability Orientation on sustainable entrepreneurship intention remains relatively under-explored.

Sustainability Orientation is increasingly recognised as an important factor in sustainable entrepreneurship, as it reflects the extent to which individuals incorporate environmental and social considerations into their entrepreneurial thinking and decision-making (Kuckertz & Wagner, 2010). For university students, developing a strong Sustainability Orientation may encourage them to view entrepreneurship not merely as an economic activity, but also as a means of addressing sustainability challenges. However, the extent to which Sustainability Orientation contributes to students' Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention remains worthy of further investigation, particularly in the Malaysian higher education context.

Although the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a strong foundation for explaining Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention through Attitude, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control, the original framework does not explicitly capture individuals' sustainability-specific orientation. Therefore, this study extends the TPB by incorporating Sustainability Orientation as an additional antecedent of Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention.

Sustainability Orientation reflects an individual's tendency to integrate environmental and social considerations into entrepreneurial decision-making and may provide a sustainability-specific explanation of

why individuals intend to engage in sustainable entrepreneurship (Kuckertz & Wagner, 2010). By incorporating Sustainability Orientation into the TPB framework, this study extends the conventional intention model beyond general behavioural and social considerations to include an individual's orientation towards sustainability. This extended perspective is particularly relevant for understanding Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among university students, as their intention to pursue sustainable entrepreneurship may depend not only on how they evaluate the behaviour and perceive social support, but also on the extent to which sustainability is embedded in their entrepreneurial orientation.

Given the broader considerations involved in sustainable entrepreneurship compared with conventional entrepreneurship, further attention is needed to understand what shapes students' intention to pursue it. Therefore, this study proposes a conceptual framework examining the influence of Attitude, Subjective Norms, Self-Efficacy, and Sustainability Orientation on Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among university students. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior, the proposed framework extends the traditional model by incorporating Self-Efficacy and Sustainability Orientation to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the formation of Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Foundation: Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposed by Ajzen (1991) provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the formation of entrepreneurial intention. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a well-established and widely applied theory for understanding human behavior, with behavioral intention reflecting an individual's readiness to engage in a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The theory posits that intention is primarily determined by three factors, namely Attitude, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control. In the context of sustainable entrepreneurship, TPB provides a useful framework for explaining why individuals develop an intention to engage in sustainable entrepreneurial activities. This study apply Self-Efficacy instead of PBC while Sustainability Orientation are incorporated as additional constructs to extend the traditional TPB framework in the context of sustainable entrepreneurship.

### Sustainable Entrepreneurship

Sustainable entrepreneurship extends the traditional focus of entrepreneurship by integrating economic, social and environmental considerations into the identification and pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities. Rather than focusing primarily on financial returns, sustainable entrepreneurship seeks to create economic value while addressing social needs and reducing environmental harm (Belz & Binder, 2017). It involves recognising opportunities that can contribute to issues such as environmental protection, social well-being, responsible resource use and long-term economic development (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018). Therefore, sustainable entrepreneurship provides a broader approach to entrepreneurship by balancing the needs of people, planet and profit, making it increasingly relevant to efforts towards sustainable development.

### Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention

Sustainable Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI) refers to an individual's intention or willingness to pursue a business venture that creates economic value while also addressing social and environmental concerns. It extends the conventional concept of entrepreneurial intention by incorporating sustainability into the intended entrepreneurial activity, reflecting an individual's willingness to consider the economic, social and environmental consequences of a future venture (Koe et al., 2019; Romero-Colmenares & Reyes-Rodríguez, 2022).

SEI is therefore important because sustainable ventures cannot emerge without individuals who are willing to pursue them. Understanding SEI can provide insights into whether future entrepreneurs are prepared to incorporate sustainability into their business decisions and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities that contribute to broader sustainable development.

## **Attitude**

Attitude refers to an individual's favourable or unfavourable evaluation or appraisal of a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Within the context of sustainable entrepreneurship, Attitude reflects the extent to which an individual perceives engaging in sustainable entrepreneurship as desirable, beneficial, valuable, or personally rewarding.

## **Subjective Norms**

Subjective Norms refer to an individual's perception of social pressure from important people or groups regarding whether a particular behaviour should or should not be performed (Ajzen, 1991). Such social referents may include family members, friends, peers, lecturers, and other significant individuals whose opinions are considered important by the individual. In entrepreneurial contexts, Subjective Norms reflect the extent to which an individual perceives that people who are important to them would approve or support their decision to become an entrepreneur.

## **Self-Efficacy**

Self-Efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to organise and execute the courses of action required to achieve particular outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Importantly, Self-Efficacy concerns an individual's belief in their capability, rather than merely the possession of actual skills or knowledge. Individuals with stronger Self-Efficacy tend to be more confident in undertaking challenging activities, exert greater effort, and persist when facing difficulties (Bandura, 1997).

## **Sustainability Orientation**

Sustainability Orientation refers to an individual's underlying concern, values, attitudes, and orientation towards environmental protection and social responsibility. In entrepreneurship research, Sustainability Orientation reflects the extent to which individuals recognise sustainability issues and consider environmental and social responsibility important when thinking about entrepreneurial activities (Kuckertz & Wagner, 2010). It therefore represents a sustainability-oriented mindset that may influence how individuals evaluate entrepreneurial opportunities and their willingness to engage in entrepreneurship that contributes to sustainable development.

## **The relationship between Attitude and SEI**

According to Ajzen (1991), a favourable Attitude towards a behaviour increases the likelihood that an individual will form a stronger intention to perform that behaviour. Empirical research provides support for this relationship. Latip (2024), using Malaysian undergraduate students, found that sustainability Attitude significantly influenced SEI.

Similarly, Gimenez-Jimenez and Hanc (2024) found that Attitude toward sustainable entrepreneurship was positively associated with sustainable entrepreneurial intentions among university students, although the strength of the relationship differed across Germany and Ecuador. Based on the theoretical and empirical evidence discussed above, a positive relationship between Attitude and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention is expected. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Attitude has a positive influence on Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention.

## **The relationship between Subjective Norms and SEI**

According to Ajzen (1991), individuals are more likely to form intentions when they perceive that significant others support the behaviour. In sustainable entrepreneurship, support from family, friends, peers, lecturers, and other relevant social groups may encourage students to consider sustainable entrepreneurship as an acceptable and desirable career choice. Empirical evidence, however, indicates that the relationship between Subjective Norms and SEI is not entirely consistent.

For instance, Gimenez-Jimenez and Hanc (2024) found that Subjective Norms significantly influenced SEI among Ecuadorian students but not among German students, demonstrating the importance of cultural context.

Similarly, research among Malaysian undergraduates by Latip (2024) found that Subjective Norms did not have a significant effect on SEI. Nevertheless, previous research has reported a positive relationship between Subjective Norms and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among university students (Romero-Colmenares & Reyes-Rodríguez, 2022).

This inconsistency provides a meaningful basis for further examination of Subjective Norms, particularly within the Malaysian higher education context. The existing literature suggests that social expectations and support from significant others can influence students' willingness to pursue sustainable entrepreneurship. Based on this argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Subjective Norms have a positive influence on Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention.

### **The relationship between Self-Efficacy and SEI**

Self-Efficacy is theoretically relevant to entrepreneurial intention because individuals are more likely to initiate challenging activities when they believe that they possess the capability to perform them successfully (Bandura, 1997). Empirical evidence supports this argument. Waris et al. (2021) identified Self-Efficacy as an important determinant within their sustainable entrepreneurship intention model among university students. More specifically for Malaysia, Chan et al. (2025) found that Self-Efficacy positively influenced green entrepreneurial intention among 302 university students.

Their findings indicate that students who perceive themselves as capable of undertaking entrepreneurship are more likely to develop sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial intentions. Therefore, stronger Self-Efficacy is expected to increase students' willingness and confidence to pursue sustainable entrepreneurship. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Self-Efficacy has a positive influence on Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention.

### **The relationship between Sustainability Orientation and SEI**

Kuckertz and Wagner (2010) were among the earlier researchers to demonstrate that Sustainability Orientation contributes to the explanation of entrepreneurial intentions and that its inclusion is particularly relevant when entrepreneurship is connected to sustainability. The relationship has also been examined in the Malaysian context. Bapoo et al. (2022) examined Sustainability Orientation among Malaysian business students using several sustainability-related dimensions and found that Commitment to Environmental Sustainability had a significant direct effect on SEI.

More recent evidence provides additional support for the proposed relationship, as Sustainability Orientation was found to have a significant positive effect on Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among business students in North India (Kumari & Sapna, 2025). This suggests that students who possess a stronger orientation towards sustainability may be more inclined to pursue entrepreneurial activities that incorporate environmental and social objectives. The reviewed literature indicates that individuals with a stronger Sustainability Orientation are more likely to consider sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial activities as a desirable career pathway. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Sustainability Orientation has a positive influence on Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention.

### **The Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical arguments and empirical evidence presented in the preceding sections provide the basis for examining the relationships between Attitude, Subjective Norms, Self-Efficacy, sustainability orientation and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention. Collectively, these relationships lead to the development of the conceptual framework proposed in this study.

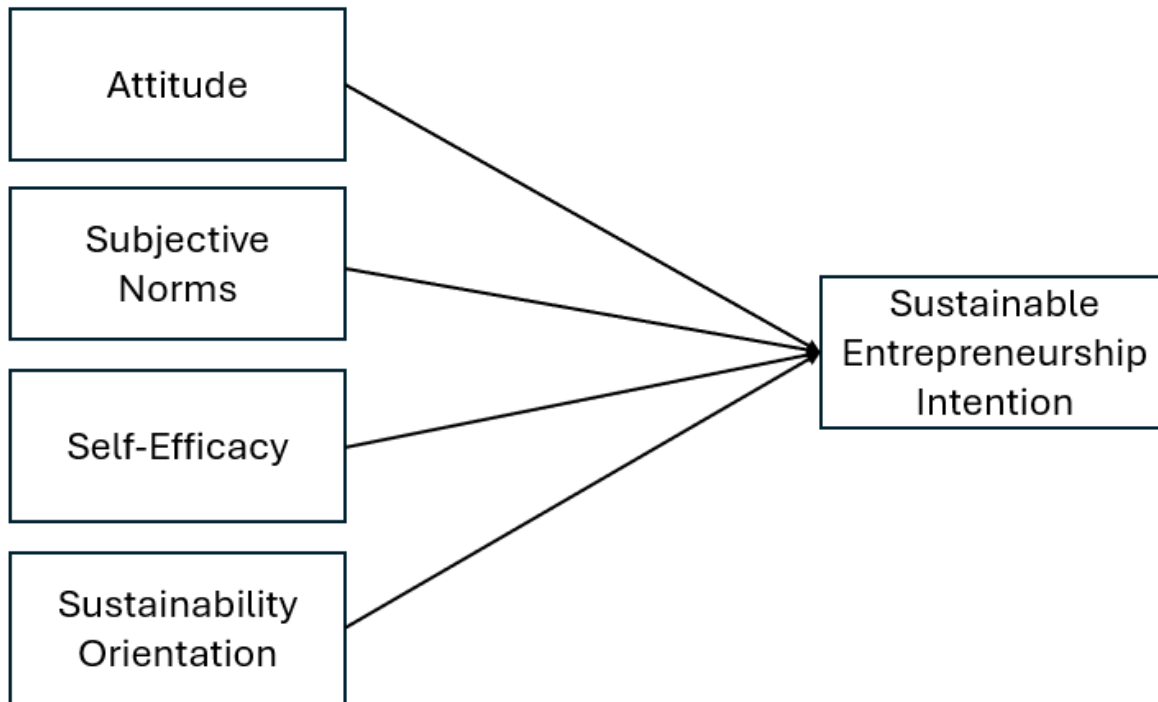


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

## METHODOLOGY

The proposed framework is intended to be empirically tested in future research using a quantitative research approach among university students in Malaysian higher education institutions. A purposive sampling technique is proposed to select respondents who meet the predetermined criteria of the study. The target population will comprise final-year undergraduate students enrolled in business-related degree programmes at both public and private universities in Malaysia. Final-year students are selected because they are approaching the transition from university to employment or self-employment and are therefore more likely to have developed clearer career aspirations and intentions regarding their future professional pathways. In addition, business students are considered an appropriate target group because their academic programmes are likely to provide them with greater exposure to entrepreneurship, business development, management, and related entrepreneurial knowledge, making them a relevant population for examining Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention. Including students from both public and private universities is intended to provide a broader representation of the Malaysian higher education context and to reduce the limitation of focusing on a single type of institution.

For the proposed empirical study, data will be collected through a structured online questionnaire developed based on measurement items adapted from established instruments in previous studies. The questionnaire will be distributed electronically through appropriate online platforms and channels to reach eligible final-year business students from the selected public and private universities. An online survey is considered appropriate because it enables efficient access to university students across different institutions and geographical locations in Malaysia.

The collected data will subsequently be analysed using appropriate quantitative techniques, such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), to assess the measurement and structural models and to examine the proposed relationships between Attitude, Subjective Norms, Self-Efficacy, Sustainability Orientation, and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention. The empirical testing will enable future research to determine the significance and strength of the proposed relationships and assess the explanatory power of the conceptual framework.

## CONCLUSION

Sustainable entrepreneurship has become increasingly important as societies and economies seek entrepreneurial solutions that address not only economic needs but also environmental and social challenges. In this context, understanding students' Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention is essential, as intention represents an important precursor to future entrepreneurial behaviour. This conceptual study therefore proposes a framework integrating Attitude, Subjective Norms, Self-Efficacy, and Sustainability Orientation as potential determinants of Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention among university students.

Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior, the proposed framework recognises the importance of students' favourable evaluations of sustainable entrepreneurship and the influence of perceived social expectations. At the same time, the framework extends the conventional TPB perspective by incorporating Self-Efficacy and Sustainability Orientation.

Self-Efficacy captures students' confidence in their ability to undertake entrepreneurial activities, while Sustainability Orientation reflects the extent to which sustainability considerations are embedded in their entrepreneurial thinking and decision-making. The integration of these factors provides a broader perspective for understanding the formation of Sustainable Entrepreneurship Intention beyond conventional behavioural and social considerations.

The proposed framework also highlights the important role of higher education institutions in preparing future entrepreneurs who are capable of responding to sustainability challenges. Universities should not focus solely on developing students' conventional entrepreneurial capabilities but should also foster positive attitudes towards sustainable entrepreneurship, strengthen students' confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities, encourage supportive social environments, and cultivate a stronger Sustainability Orientation. Such efforts may contribute to developing future entrepreneurs who are not only capable of creating economic value but are also prepared to create social and environmental value.

Nevertheless, the proposed framework remains conceptual and therefore requires empirical validation. Future research should empirically validate the proposed framework using large and diverse samples of university students from different disciplines, institutions, regions, and cultural backgrounds. Structural Equation Modeling or other appropriate multivariate techniques could be used to examine the proposed relationships and determine the relative contribution of each construct. Researchers should clearly justify each additional variable incorporated into the extended TPB model and assess potential mediation or moderation effects.

Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for determining whether sustainable entrepreneurial intentions eventually lead to actual business creation and sustainable entrepreneurial practices. Future studies should also consider the roles of entrepreneurship education, environmental values, institutional support, access to finance, digital competencies, and perceived barriers. Such evidence could help universities develop targeted entrepreneurship curricula, incubation programs, mentoring, and sustainability-focused initiatives that effectively convert students' entrepreneurial intentions into meaningful and sustainable ventures.

## Ethical Approval

**Ethical Approval:** Ethical approval was not required for this study as the research adopts a conceptual approach and does not involve the recruitment of human participants, the collection of primary data, or experimentation involving human or animal subjects. The study is based solely on the review, synthesis, and integration of existing theoretical and empirical literature to develop the proposed conceptual framework.

## Conflict of Interest

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or other competing interests that could have influenced the design, development, interpretation, or presentation of this study. The authors confirm that the research was conducted independently and that no conflict of interest exists in relation to the development and submission of this manuscript.

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