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Cognitive dynamics and entrepreneurial intent: Analysis of determinants among students at the University of Bejaia

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Abstract:

This study analyses the economic and cognitive mechanisms that structure the entrepreneurial intent of students in a context of saturated graduate labour market. It examines the relationship between individual and institutional determinants in the construction of this intention. From a sample of 177 students at the University of Béjaïa, across all disciplines, and using a principal component analysis followed by hierarchical regression, the results show that cognitive dimensions, in particular perceived desirability and feasibility, have a significant effect on the intention to undertake, in accordance with the planned behaviour theory and the entrepreneurial event model. Entrepreneurial intent stems from a personal assessment of available opportunities and resources, while institutional factors like training programs strengthen perceived feasibility and commitment to act.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial intent, perceived desirability, perceived feasibility, cognitive models, university students
Jel Classification Codes: L26**,** I25**,** I23, O15

Introduction

Entrepreneurship has gradually become a central focus of public policy in the context of economic transition, especially in emerging countries facing a saturation of the wage labour market. The university, long perceived as a space for the reproduction of academic skills, is now invested with a new mission: to foster the emergence of entrepreneurial behaviours among students (Fayolle and Linan, 2014). In a context such as that of Algeria, marked by a persistent dependence on public sectors, the promotion of entrepreneurial intent appears not only as an economic lever, but also

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as an indicator of cultural transformation in the face of the logic of administered employment (Boutillier and Uzunidis, 2016).

The founding work of Shapero and Sokol (1982) and the model of entrepreneurial intention developed by Ajzen (1991) have shown that entrepreneurial action is not the result of spontaneous impulse, but of a cognitive process combining individual representations, perceived norms and subjective evaluation of feasibility. Recent literature, particularly in developing countries, points out that these dimensions are shaped by contextual factors such as the institutional environment, the perception of local opportunities and the credibility of academic support mechanisms (Linan and Fayolle, 20). In the case of the University of Béjaïa, the introduction of entrepreneurship awareness modules demonstrates a desire to restructure the professional trajectories of students. However, the question remains whether these initiatives are actually transforming intentions. Empirical research in the Maghreb contexts indicates that entrepreneurial intent is often held back by a high perception of risk, a low social legitimacy of the beginner entrepreneur, and an ambivalent representation of economic success (Mezghiche, 2024). To this is added the persistence of a logic of statutory security, pushing many students to favor the competitions of the public service as a legitimate professional horizon. Therefore, it becomes essential to examine the precise determinants of entrepreneurial intent among students at the University of Béjaïa, taking into account both individual factors (perceived self-efficacy), social influences (perceived support, family norms) and university experience related to entrepreneurship.

The question can therefore be formulated as follows: to what extent do personal, social and academic factors influence the entrepreneurial intent of students at the University of Béjaïa, and which are the most important? Based on contributions from the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and recent work on university entrepreneurship, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: The higher the student's perceived level of self-efficacy, the stronger the entrepreneurial intent.
- H2: Perceived social support (family and institutional) has a positive and significant influence on entrepreneurial intent.
- H3: Participation in university schemes related to entrepreneurship (training, incubator, competition) reinforces the entrepreneurial intention by changing the perception of feasibility.

This study is initiated by a theoretical framework mobilizing the contributions of Shapero and Ajzen in order to conceptualize the dimensions of desirability, feasibility and propensity for action. It continues with the presentation of the methodological framework applied to students at the University of Béjaïa. Finally, the analysis of the results leads to a critical discussion on the real effectiveness of the university support arrangements and prepares the conclusion in terms of levers and structural limits.

1- The contribution of intention models to the explanation of entrepreneurial behaviour

The analysis of entrepreneurial behaviour has long been dominated by personality-based approaches, assuming the existence of a typical entrepreneurial profile

characterized by psychological attributes such as risk propensity, the need for accomplishment or the locus of internal control. However, Gartner's (1988) work has profoundly challenged this deterministic logic by arguing that entrepreneurship cannot be reduced to a list of individual traits, but must be understood as an intentional, socially recorded and cognitively structured process. This epistemological inflection paved the way for the integration of intention theories into the study of the entrepreneurial phenomenon.

Models of intent make a major contribution in that they view entrepreneurial action not as a mechanical reaction to economic opportunities, but as a decision built on subjective representations of desirability and perceived feasibility (Krueger & Carsrud, 1993). In other words, business creation is not the result of behavioural automation, but the result of a prior cognitive orientation that the literature designates as entrepreneurial intent. From this perspective, intention is the best observable predictor of future behaviour when it is planned and involves a long-term commitment (Bird 1988).

The entrepreneurial event model developed by Shapero and Sokol (1982) is one of the first to explicitly formulate this idea. It postulates that entrepreneurial intent emerges when three subjective conditions are met: the perception of social and personal desirability, the assessment of realistic feasibility and the presence of a contextual trigger that breaks the previous balance. This model highlights the importance of institutional and cultural contexts in the formation of intention, which is particularly relevant in economies where social norms value job security more than individual initiative.

At the same time, the theory of planned behaviour proposed by Ajzen (1991) has been widely used to explain entrepreneurial intent. According to this theory, three cognitive variables structure the intention to act: attitude towards behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Applied to entrepreneurship, this approach considers that the intention to start a business depends both on the perceived personal interest in the entrepreneurial act, on the normative pressure exerted by the social environment and on the assessment of individual capacities to overcome obstacles related to the creation of activity (Liñán & Chen, 2009). Empirical research conducted in different contexts confirms the relevance of these models to understanding entrepreneurial engagement. For example, the works of Kautonen, van Gelderen and Tornikoski (2013) show that cognitive variables derived from the theory of planned behaviour explain significantly the transition from intention to action, but that their effect can be modulated by institutional factors such as the credibility of entrepreneurial support schemes or the stability of economic rules. This articulation between individual cognition and opportunity structures makes it possible to overcome the opposition between structural determinism and individual voluntarism in the analysis of entrepreneurial behaviour. Thus, intention models profoundly renew the understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour by placing it in a process, cognitive and contextualized logic. They give the intention a central position in explaining the transition from mere aspiration to engagement in an effective entrepreneurial project. In the case of students, this perspective is particularly enlightening because it makes it possible to understand how academic socialization, representations of the professional future and

perceptions of institutional support participate, or not, in the formation of an entrepreneurial disposition.

2-Theoretical anchoring and research hypotheses

The analysis of entrepreneurial intentions is based on a cognitive reading of individual behaviour, postulating that the action results from a structured mental orientation upstream. From this perspective, Shapero and Sokol's (1982) models and Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour converge on three central dimensions: perceived desirability, perceived feasibility, and propensity for action. These dimensions reflect not only the psychological positioning of the individual in the face of entrepreneurship, but also the way in which he internalises the constraints and opportunities of his environment. Their articulation makes it possible to formulate coherent hypotheses on the entrepreneurial intention of the students of the University of Béjaïa.

2.1. Desirability

Desirability refers to the favourable or unfavourable representation that the individual constructs about the entrepreneurial act. It is not limited to an individual preference, but results from an emotional and social assessment of entrepreneurial status (Fayolle & Liñán, 2014). In contexts where entrepreneurship is socially valued, desirability is reinforced by mechanisms of identification and symbolic recognition. Conversely, when entrepreneurial failure is stigmatized or the figure of the entrepreneur is associated with a precarious logic, desirability may remain low despite the existence of economic opportunities. For students, this dimension is built in interaction with the institutional discourses produced by the university, the media and the family circle. The work of Liñán and Fayolle (2015) shows that desirability is strongly correlated with the social image of the entrepreneur and the perception of prestige associated with economic success. In a context such as that of Béjaïa, where the civil service remains a central reference for stability, entrepreneurial desirability can encounter cultural resistance. Thus, the higher the perceived desirability of the entrepreneurial act, the more likely the student will be to formulate a structured entrepreneurial intention.

2.2. Feasibility

Perceived feasibility refers to an individual's assessment of his or her ability to overcome barriers to creating an activity. In the literature, this concept is often related to the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), defined as the belief in one's own ability to mobilize the cognitive and social resources necessary for the success of a project. Within the framework of Shapero and Sokol's (1982) model, feasibility reflects the degree of confidence of the individual in the concrete possibility of transforming an intention into action.

For students, this dimension is particularly influenced by exposure to support devices, knowledge of administrative mechanisms and practical experience gained from simulated or real-life entrepreneurial projects. Kolvereid and Isaksen (2006) point out that perceived feasibility increases significantly when the individual has been confronted with action-oriented training environments rather than just the theoretical transmission of knowledge. In an academic context where entrepreneurial

programs are sometimes perceived as formal or disconnected from economic reality, the challenge is to measure the extent to which feasibility is actually internalized by students in Béjaïa.

2.3. Propensity for action

The propensity for action constitutes the dynamic extension of the two preceding dimensions. It reflects the individual's ability to convert intention into actual behaviour when a contextual trigger appears (Krueger, 2009). It does not yet correspond to the action itself, but to a willingness to initiate an entrepreneurial process when conditions permit. In Shapero's work, this dimension is activated when the individual perceives a break in balance, for example the saturation of the formal labour market and has a sufficiently structured intention to envisage an entrepreneurial alternative. In universities, the propensity for action can be stimulated by experiential environments such as incubators, project competitions or interactions with local entrepreneurs. These devices create micro-situations of symbolic rupture, prompting the student to consider entrepreneurship not as an abstraction, but as a realistic option. The propensity for action then becomes an indicator of entrepreneurial maturity, reflecting a mental readiness to seize the opportunity when it manifests itself.

3-Methodology

3.1. Data collection

3.1.1. Sample and framework of the study

The survey was conducted among 177 students enrolled at the University of Béjaïa, recruited according to a sampling protocol designed to preserve a relative representativeness of the main fields of study (science, humanities, law, economics, engineering, social sciences). The choice of a sample of 177 respondents results from a compromise between operational constraints and statistical power requirements for multivariate analyses (factor analyses and hierarchical regressions). The inclusion criteria were: student registration status for the current academic year, ability to respond in Arabic/French, and informed consent. The socio-demographic characteristics recorded included age, gender, educational attainment, marital status, and the existence of an entrepreneurial family history. The collection took place over a three-week period, combining face-to-face sessions (amphis, TD) and dissemination via a secure online platform. Respondents were informed of the objectives, anonymity and right of withdrawal. The actual response rate led to 177 usable questionnaires after verification of the completion criteria (excluding questionnaires with more than 30% missing items).

3.1.2. Measuring instrument

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of four components. The first part provided information on consent and socio-demographic information. The second component measured institutional exposure: participation in entrepreneurship training, involvement in projects/incubators, and participation in competitions. The third part contained psychometric scales dedicated to the theoretical dimensions studied: perceived desirability (4 items), perceived feasibility/entrepreneurial self-effectiveness (6 items) and propensity for action (4 items). The fourth component

measured entrepreneurial intent (4 standardized items). All scales used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = disagree at all; 5 = strongly agree). Control items detecting social desirability have been inserted to limit desirability bias.

3.1.3. Instrumental validation and pre-test

Prior to the primary collection, a pre-test was conducted with 18 students (≈10% of the target sample) to assess readability, clarity of items and pass time. On the basis of the returns, two ambiguous items were reformulated and the order of the blocks was adjusted to reduce the exhaustion effect. The final and pre-test versions were bilingual (French/Arabic) and administered in hard copy and online in accordance with the logistics.

3.2. Measurement and operationalization of variables

To measure our variables, 7-position Likert scales ranging from "not at all agree" to "completely agree" were used.

Dependent variable - Entrepreneurial intent (EI). Adapted from Linan (2009), four items were used to operationalize the variable dependent on the "entrepreneurial intent" model: (1) "Do you intend to undertake? "(2)" Undertake after graduation, "(3)" Search for creative opportunity "(from" being employed "to" starting a business "), (4)" Advantages offered by the State. " The reliability analysis shows a satisfactory Cronbach Alpha (α = 0.714).

The independent variables "desirability, feasibility and propensity for action" are operationalised as follows:

- Desirability is measured by two items: (1) "Is your desire for creation strong?" and (2) "Are you enthusiastic about creating? ». The reliability analysis shows a satisfactory Cronbach Alpha (α = 0.72).
- Feasibility is also understood from two points: (1) "Do you think you can control the creative process alone?" and (2) "Do you have confidence in your ability to succeed? ». The reliability analysis indicates an acceptable Cronbach Alpha (α = 0.646).
- Finally, the propensity for action is measured through three items: (1) "It is useless to make predictions about the future, because everything is a question of luck? "(2)" Do you think what should happen will happen whatever your actions? " and (3) "Do you think life is a poker game? ». The reliability analysis reveals a satisfactory Cronbach Alpha (α = 0.731).

Control variables. Students were asked about their age, sex (coded as 0 for men and 1 for women), educational level (1 = L3, 2 = M1, 3 = M 2), marital status (0 = Single, 1 = Married), and whether or not to take entrepreneurship training (0 = no, 1 = yes).

3.3. Results of the hierarchical regression model

In order to assess the influence of psychological and socio-demographic variables on entrepreneurial intent (EI), a hierarchical regression was carried out in two stages. The first model includes the psychological variables derived from the entrepreneurial event model: desirability, perceived feasibility and propensity for action (Propension_Action). The second model introduces, in addition to these variables, a

set of sociodemographic variables: age, gender, educational attainment, marital status, and whether or not to pursue entrepreneurship training.

Table 1. Pearson correlations

						Your Sex	Your Age	Your marital status	Your level of study	are you undergoing entrepreneurship training?
Pearson correlation		1,000	0,362	0,297	0,179	0,172	-0,313	0,029	-0,152	0,335
		0,362	1,000	0,341	0,527	-0,139	-0,175	-0,180	-0,154	0,361
	Feasibility	0,297	0,341	1,000	0,309	-0,029	-0,110	0,403	-0,103	0,235
	Propension_Action	0,179	0,527	0,309	1,000	-0,487	-0,106	-0,115	-0,016	0,115
	Your Sex	0,172	-0,139	-0,029	-0,487	1,000	-0,452	0,180	-0,177	0,083
	Your Age	-0,313	-0,175	-0,110	-0,106	-0,452	1,000	-0,115	0,357	-0,222
	Your marital status	0,029	-0,180	0,403	-0,115	0,180	-0,115	1,000	0,166	0,142
	Your level of study	-0,152	-0,154	-0,103	-0,016	-0,177	0,357	0,166	1,000	-0,184
	are you undergoing entrepreneurship training?	0,335	0,361	0,235	0,115	0,083	-0,222	0,142	-0,184	1,000
Sig. (unilateral)	EI		0,000	0,000	0,009	0,011	0,000	0,351	0,022	0,000
	Desirability	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,032	0,010	0,008	0,020	0,000
	Feasibility	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,349	0,073	0,000	0,086	0,001
	Propension_Action	0,009	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,079	0,064	0,415	0,064
	Your Sex	0,011	0,032	0,349	0,000		0,000	0,008	0,009	0,135
	Your Age	0,00	0,01	0,07	0,079	0,000		0,064	0,000	0,001
	Your marital status	0,351	0,008	0,000	0,064	0,008	0,064		0,014	0,030
	Your level of study	0,022	0,020	0,086	0,415	0,009	0,000	0,014		0,007
	are you undergoing entreprene	0,000	0,000	0,001	0,064	0,135	0,001	0,030	0,007	

urship training?

Source: Results obtained with SPSS V26

3.3.1. Interpretation of regression coefficients

3.3.1.1. Model 1: Main variables (cognitive)

- The first model includes three variables from the cognitive framework of entrepreneurial intent: desirability, perceived feasibility and propensity for action (Propension_Action). The results indicate that:
  Desirability has a positive and highly significant effect on entrepreneurial intent (β = 0.321; t = 3,832; p < 0.001).
- Perceived feasibility also has a positive and significant effect (β = 0.204; t = 2,723; p = 0.007).
- Propensity to action has no significant effect (β = -0.053; p = 0.524).
- The values of tolerance (all greater than 0.6) and VIF (all less than 2) show an absence of multicolinearity.

Table 2. regressions

Summary of models

Model	R	R-2	R-two adjusted	Standard error of the estimate	Change statistics					Durbin - Watson
					Variation in R-2	Change in F	ddl1	ddl2	Sig. Change in F	
1	409a	0,167	0,153	0,89563	0,167	11,567	3	173	0,000	
2	518b	0,268	0,233	0,85190	0,101	4,643	5	168	0,001	1,259

a. Predictors: (Constant), Propension_Action, Faisability, Desirability
b. Predictors: (Constant), Propension_Action, Faisability, Desirability, Your age, Your level of education, are you undergoing entrepreneurship training?, Your marital status, Your sex
c. Dependent variable: IE

Source: Results obtained with SPSS V26

3.3.1.2. Model 2: Control variables (socio-demographic)

When the socio-demographic variables are introduced, the results of the second model show some changes in the strength and significance of the predictors.
Desirability remains a positive and significant predictor (β = 0.182; p = 0.044).

- Perceived feasibility remains significant (β = 0.204; p = 0.017).
- Propensity for action remains insignificant (β = 0.051; p = 0.602).
- Training in entrepreneurship has a positive and significant effect (β = 0.185; p = 0.014).
- Gender has a marginally significant positive effect (β = 0.163; p = 0.084).
- Age shows a negative trend relationship (β = -0.162; p = 0.065).
- Marital status and educational attainment do not have significant effects.

- The colinearity indices (VIF between 1.2 and 2.2) confirm the absence of redundancy between the variables.

Table 3. Hierarchical regressions

Coefficients

Model		Non-standardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.	Colinearity statistics	
		B	Standard error	Silly billy			Tolerance	
1	(Constant)	1,412	0,204		6,911	0,000		
		0,359	0,094	0,321	3,832	0,000	0,687	1,455
		0,165	0,061	0,204	2,723	0,007	0,861	1,162
	Propension_Action	-0,045	0,070	-0,053	-0,639	0,524	0,703	1,422
2	(Constant)	1,170	0,731		1,600	0,111		
		0,203	0,100	0,182	2,026	0,044	0,542	1,846
		0,166	0,069	0,204	2,410	0,017	0,608	1,644
	Propension_Action	0,044	0,083	0,051	0,523	0,602	0,456	2,191
	Your Sex	0,319	0,184	0,163	1,738	0,084	0,494	2,025
	Your Age	-0,365	0,197	-0,162	-1,857	0,065	0,576	1,736
	Your marital status	-0,471	0,417	-0,095	-1,130	0,260	0,621	1,611
	Your level of study	0,038	0,083	0,034	0,460	0,646	0,777	1,287
	Are you undergoing entrepreneurship training?	0,383	0,154	0,185	2,493	0,014	0,788	1,270

a. Dependent variable : IE

Source: Results obtained with SPSS V26

Table 4. ANOVA a factor

		Sum of squares		Average square		Sig.
1		27,836	3	9,279	11,567	
	Of Student	138,773	173	0,802		
		166,609	176			
2		44,685	8	5,586	7,696	

Of Student	121,924	168	0,726
	166,609	176	

Source: Results obtained with SPSS V26

4-Outcome and analysis

The results show that cognitive dimensions - in particular perceived desirability and feasibility - have a significant influence on students' entrepreneurial intentions. This finding converges with the theoretical framework proposed by Ajzen (1991), for which the intention results from a subjective evaluation of opportunities and capacities, and with the Shapero and Sokol model (1982) which emphasizes the role of perception of desirability and feasibility as drivers of passage to the intention. In the context of the University of Béjaïa, where the saturation of the graduate labour market is widely perceived, these cognitive factors seem to play a symbolic compensatory role: entrepreneurship becomes a possible response to professional uncertainty, provided that the student perceives himself capable and legitimate to act. This cognitive process is reinforced by the contribution of institutional factors, in particular participation in training or accompanying arrangements. These elements do not produce the intent directly, but act as catalysts by increasing the perception of feasibility, reducing the uncertainty associated with administrative processes and providing concrete benchmarks. This dynamic confirms the idea put forward by Kolvereid and Isaksen that exposure to action-oriented learning environments changes the portrayal of entrepreneurship from an abstract ideal to a conceivable trajectory.

Finally, the fact that the final model explains 27% of the variance can be considered satisfactory in terms of the nature of the phenomenon studied. Entrepreneurial intentions are complex processes at the intersection of rational, emotional and contextual dimensions. This level of variance indicates that, while cognitive variables are central, a significant part of entrepreneurial intent remains linked to more diffuse dynamics - such as implicit social norms, social capital or family trajectories, which should be incorporated into future research to refine understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study took place in an academic context marked by a gradual transition from the traditional academic model to a logic of employability and entrepreneurship. At the University of Béjaïa, as in many Algerian institutions, the promotion of entrepreneurial culture has become a strategic axis, often presented as a response to the limitations of the labour market and the saturation of traditional markets. It is in this context that we questioned the cognitive dynamics that structure the entrepreneurial intent of students, mobilizing an approach inspired both by the planned behavior model and the theories of the triggering event.

The progressive reading of the results reveals an intentional configuration marked by the predominance of cognitive dimensions over strictly sociodemographic determinants. The intention to create an entrepreneurial activity does not appear as a mere extension of pre-existing individual characteristics, but rather as the translation

of a mental projection work where the perceived attractiveness of the project and the conviction of being able to do so play a structuring role. Dedicated university training acts here not as a mechanical factor, but as an indicator of the possibilities: it seems to create a breach in the ordinary perception of the labour market, by making the entrepreneurial option more conceivable, and therefore more conceivable. The fact that the propensity to act does not produce a significant effect also questions the real depth of the declared intention. Some students seem intellectually willing to consider entrepreneurship, without this being translated into tension towards action. We are then faced with a "suspended" intention, fuelled by desirability and feasibility, but still fragile as long as no institutional or socio-economic trigger comes to catalyze it. In this context, the university should not only transmit tools, but organize breakthrough situations capable of transforming a latent intention into a dynamic of engagement.

These results invite to go beyond a purely declarative reading of the entrepreneurial intention and to question the real ability of the accompanying devices to provoke a lasting cognitive changeover. If training improves the perception of feasibility, it does not seem enough to trigger a dynamic of engagement when the student does not perceive a break in his socio-economic horizon. Therefore, the central question is no longer only to strengthen entrepreneurial skills, but to create environments where entrepreneurship becomes a credible response to a situation perceived as unsustainable. This implies rethinking the role of the university not as a mere provider of knowledge, but as a space for confrontation with reality, capable of generating "rocking moments" where intention densifies and takes shape. A reflection on the concrete conditions of emergence of these flip-flops then appears necessary if it is desired to transform a latent intention into an effective trajectory.

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