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Article in *Studies in Higher Education* · September 2023

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To cite this article: Giuseppina Maria Cardella, Brizeida Raquel Hernández Sánchez, João Manuel Rosado de Miranda Justo & José Carlos Sánchez García (27 Sep 2023): Understanding social entrepreneurial intention in higher education: does gender and type of study matter?, Studies in Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2023.2250384](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2250384)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2250384>



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Understanding social entrepreneurial intention in higher education: does gender and type of study matter?

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is a research topic that has received great attention from academics especially in recent years. However, the results in the literature are far from univocal, for example, there is no clear conceptual delimitation of the term, and it is often analyzed using the same theoretical models of traditional entrepreneurship. With the present study, we have attempted to overcome this problem by analyzing different antecedents, closer to the social and emotional universe, and detached from a male-centric and traditional vision of entrepreneurship, with the aim of understanding social entrepreneurial intentions in higher education. Results obtained from a sample of 962 college students showed that prior experience with social problems (PESP) and empathy (EMP) have a significant and positive impact on social entrepreneurial intention (SEI). Furthermore, social self-efficacy (SES-E), moral obligation (MO), and perceived social support (PSS), in addition to directly influencing SEI, mediated the relationship between PESP-SEI, and the relationship between EMP-SEI. More interestingly, gender (male vs female), but not the different type of study (social sciences vs economics and business sciences), moderated the relationship between EMP-SEI to the benefit of women. Given the importance of social entrepreneurship as an alternative solution to the current economic crisis, these are important results because, on the one hand, they make it possible to overcome the male-female gap that characterizes traditional entrepreneurship, on the other, they underline the need to introduce different constructs closer to the social and emotional sphere into entrepreneurship education programs.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 25 March 2023
Accepted 16 August 2023


KEYWORDS

Social entrepreneurial intention; previous experience; empathy; gender; higher education

Introduction

The post-COVID-19 crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities of societies, which have had to rethink the way economic and social activities are organized. The crisis has required the need for strong responses based on solidarity, cooperation, and responsibility to support economic actors in their efforts to 'repair' and 'transform' societies. In this sense, social entrepreneurship, whose business

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2250384>.

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models are built around these principles, can help reshape post-crisis economies and societies in an innovative way, generating social value (OECD 2020).

The International Labour Organization data (ILO 2020) about effects of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the strong and negative impact on 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy, the most vulnerable in the labor market, and on more than 436 million enterprises worldwide. The World Bank Group's estimates showed that around 95 million people still live in extreme poverty today (Gerszon Mahler et al. 2022). In this sense, it seems important to focus community efforts, 'building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change, and the many other global challenges we face' (Guterres 2020, 2).

Based on the above, it is evident how important it is to analyze the factors that can promote and support social entrepreneurial intention in higher education to understand which of these can be used as tools that allow in a cooperative and collaborative way to organize activities such as alternative to traditional economic which is usually presented in a less inclusive way (especially for women and for the most vulnerable people). According to Horne et al. (2020), social entrepreneurship plays an important role in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whose programs produce social benefits inspired by principles of environmental sustainability and equality.

However, despite the scientific community's great interest in social entrepreneurship, there is still no clear consensus in the literature on the conceptual delimitation of the term due to its recent development, as well as the lack of specific theoretical approaches for its analysis, which very often use traditional entrepreneurship models (Cardella et al. 2021). This is a gap that should be filled because, considering the importance that social entrepreneurship has in mitigating the consequences of the economic crisis, it is necessary to know how such situations affect the behavior or intention of individuals and which factors can contribute to its development (Fernández-Laviada, López-Gutiérrez, and Pérez 2020).

The present study examines the determinants of social entrepreneurial intention through the model of Mair and Noboa (2006) and further developed by Hockerts (2017). Unlike the models just mentioned, in the present study we consider, in addition to prior experience, also empathy as an antecedent of social entrepreneurial intention, furthermore we analyze the mediating effects of social self-efficacy, moral obligation and perceived social support. In the literature, traditional models of entrepreneurship describe intentions as the most important predictors of behavior and most of these models, in line with socio-cognitive theory (Bandura 1986), focus on the interaction between individual and situational factors.

Recognizing the importance of situational factors, in this article we also focus on individual factors and their interaction in predicting behavioral intentions. Simply put, our model suggests that intentions to start a social enterprise develop from prior experience and emotional attitude (empathy), which are influenced by cognitive attitudes (moral obligation and social self-efficacy) and situational factors (social support).

Research on social entrepreneurial intentions has shown that prior experience is the critical predictor of social entrepreneurial intentions, in our study we also consider empathy, as it was found to be an important antecedent of social entrepreneurial self-efficacy and social entrepreneurial intentions (Bacq and Alt 2018; Ukil, Almashayekhi, and Ullah 2023).

Furthermore, the review findings by Tan, Le, and Xuan (2020) demonstrated a lack of empirical studies examining the effects of socio-demographic variables in the study of social entrepreneurial intention. Addressing this shortcoming, this study hypothesized that gender and educational background, as demographic variables, could have an interaction effect with SEI predictors. Thus, understanding gender differences and the types of studies in the influence of SEI-associated variables seems of crucial importance. The idea is that the male supremacy that characterizes traditional entrepreneurial intentions is reduced in social entrepreneurship thanks to the adoption of emotional variables, close to the female universe. For example, British Council study (2016) revealed that one fifth

of social enterprises in Bangladesh are led by women, which is much higher than traditional enterprises.

Experiences gained from training and learning appear to allow social entrepreneurs to understand what works and what doesn't work before committing to a new venture, identify role models and develop confidence in setting up a business (Shumate et al. 2014). Khuong and An (2016) showed the positive association between practical experiences and entrepreneurial intentions, emphasizing the importance of entrepreneurship education and training in shaping students' future careers. The context of this study was that of university education system, in this sense we have selected two different areas of knowledge: (1) social sciences based on social principles and prevention of social problems; and (2) economics and business sciences, based on the learning of entrepreneurial dynamics. These are students who, during their educational programs, have participated in seminars and practical internships related to their type of study (social science: practical experience with social-sector organizations, which can generate familiarity with such types of social problems; economics and business science: entrepreneurship education and practical experience with commercial enterprises).

The aim of this study is to shed light on the possible career alternatives of higher education students, focusing on the analysis of the factors (integrating individual and situational factors) that can contribute to the development of social entrepreneurial intentions, detaching us from traditional models and a culturally male-dominated vision of the entrepreneurship and analyzing the role of two different educational pathways in shaping social entrepreneurial intentions.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Mair and Noboa (2006) were the first authors to develop a theoretical model on the antecedents of social entrepreneurial intentions. Their model explicitly refers to Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour which considers intention as the set of indications about the individual's will to implement a behavior, thanks to the relationships of three important antecedent, namely, attitude towards behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. The fact that intention is controlled by individual will is one of the main reasons why, even today, it is considered a fundamental and determining factor in the prediction of human behavior and associated socio-psychological models (Sheeran 2002).

Starting from these important premises and adapting them to the field of social entrepreneurship, Mair and Noboa (2006) proposed four antecedents of social entrepreneurial intention. In their model, attitudes towards behavior were replaced by empathy, moral judgment was considered a substitute for social norms, self-efficacy and the perception of social support were considered as proxies of behavioral control (respectively internal and external behavioral control).

More recently, Hockerts (2017) has further expanded this model, adding prior experience as an important predictor of social entrepreneurial intention. According to the author, familiarity with social problems supports the formation of intentions. Furthermore, the antecedents suggested by Mair and Noboa mediate the effect between experience and intentions. In other words, exposure to social organizations increases the four antecedents, which in turn influence intentions.

The models presented so far explain social entrepreneurial intentions by making explicit reference to traditional models of entrepreneurship and neglecting the importance of emotional factors in predicting the 'social' aspect of entrepreneurship. To overcome this problem, we further revisit the model of Mair and Noboa (2006) and Hockerts (2017) and propose empathy as an antecedent, together with prior experiences, of SEI. Previous research suggests that the decision to set up a social business is largely influenced by one's effectiveness, the moral motivation to engage in the social good, and the context in which it operates (Cacciotti et al. 2016; Ukil 2022). Thus, in the present article, prior experience and empathy explain SEI through the interaction of individual (social self-efficacy and moral obligation) and complementary situational mechanisms (perceived social support) (Bacq and Alt 2018; Fu et al. 2022; Ip et al. 2021; Tiwari, Bhat, and Tikoria 2022). The idea

is that prior experiences with social organizations combined with compassion towards others and therefore the willingness to engage in social good, triggers a cognitive evaluation that will lead people to consider whether they feel capable, morally motivated and have a sufficient support to contribute to a social purpose, which subsequently influences their decision to set up a social enterprise.

Prior experience with social problems is regarded as the subjective and direct experience with social issues in the contexts of social organizations (Hockerts 2017). Empirical evidence has shown that prior experience can be a trigger and a guide for potential entrepreneurs because such experiences nurture and encourage them to start up an enterprise (Aloulou and Algarni 2022; Bazan et al. 2020), as it fosters the development of problem-solving skills and strengthens the individual's beliefs about the feasibility of an entrepreneurial career (Bignotti and Roux 2020).

Specifically, this approach considers the possibility that individuals create their own environment, that behavior is controlled by factors internal and external to the individual, and that situations are a function of people and vice versa. There are reciprocal causal links between the person, the environment and behavior (Bandura 1986), therefore, individuals can intentionally and directly change their current circumstances and given situations.

Behavior is not a direct consequence of the interaction between the person and the environment, but the behavior shapes itself on the individual and has an impact on the environment and its constraints. Thus, experience forges the individual's beliefs, shaping her mindset and influencing future behavior.

Students can gain experience through education: the results of a study with 485 Canadian university students conducted by Bazan et al. (2020), showed that the experience gained in the university environment has positively influenced the student's social entrepreneurial intention; or through direct observation: previous studies have identified that the family experiences of social involvement, acting as positive role models (e.g. parents: Carr and Sequeira 2007; Chlosta et al. 2012; Luc 2020) can change members' entrepreneurial intentions.

Based on the above, we introduce our first hypothesis:

H1: PESP has a direct and positive effect on SEI.

Empathy is defined as 'the attempt by one self-aware self to comprehend unjudgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self' (Wispé 1986, 318). It is considered as a critical quality for many professions, such as health care and social work (Petrucci et al. 2016; Schwan 2018), and it demonstrates an individual's emotional-cognitive attitude towards others (Urban and Msimango-Galawe 2019). Empathy is not only the willingness to care for the griefs of others, but is also associated with a real-life propensity to help them (Younis et al. 2021). According to the literature, empathic individuals, compared to non-empaths, are more likely to find solutions to social problems and respond to society's needs as they recognize the importance of creating social value (Ip et al. 2022; Usman et al. 2022). According to Tiwari, Bhat, and Tikoria (2022), despite the undoubted importance that literature has attached to this construct, it would be incorrect to say that all empathic people will become social entrepreneurs, rather it should be stated that high levels of empathy support the development of social entrepreneurial intention.

Based on the results in the literature, we hypothesized that:

H2: EMP has a direct and positive effect on SEI.

In psychology, self-efficacy is an important motivational construct that influences individual choices, goals, emotional reactions, effort, coping and persistence. It refers to the belief that the individual has about the ability to achieve a certain goal (Bandura 1977), it is considered the most important and strongest antecedent of social entrepreneurial intention (Aure 2018; Hsu and Wang 2019; Ip et al. 2022).

Research confirms that those with higher SES-E perceive their environment as more opportunistic rather than risk-laden and tend to believe in their ability to influence goal achievement (Taylor and

Wilson 2019). The development of social self-efficacy helps an individual adapt to the social entrepreneurship environment and can lead to high levels of innovativeness, expandability, perceived social impact and enterprise sustainability, which increase the potential for an individual in becoming a social entrepreneur (Ip and Liang 2023).

In line with the study by Li et al. (2020) high levels of self-efficacy refer to an increased likelihood of undertaking social entrepreneurship actions; according to Wu et al. (2021) social self-efficacy not only has a direct effect on social entrepreneurial intention, but also positively moderates the whole model of general mediation. The following hypothesis is then proposed:

H3: SES-E has a direct and positive effect on SEI.

Moral obligation is considered the key factor that differentiates social entrepreneurs from traditional entrepreneurs (Mair and Noboa 2006). Despite its importance deriving from the creation of social value through the implementation of ethical behaviors (for example, helping disadvantaged people, Beugré 2016), its role in social entrepreneurial intention is very controversial and ambiguous.

Some recent studies have confirmed the positive relationship between moral obligation and social entrepreneurial intention (Ashraf 2021; Rambe and Ndofirepi 2021), others studies have not shown any significant relationship (Aloulou and Algarni 2022; Chavali, Mavuri, and Durrah 2022; Trajano et al. 2022).

Despite the controversial results, in this study, we investigate the positive effects of moral obligation on SEI because, similarly to empathy, its importance in activating awareness of the desire to create social enterprises (Gomez Lacap, Mulyaningsih, and Ramadani 2018; Hockerts 2017), and directing individuals towards social behaviors, rather than profits (Tan, Pham, and Bui 2021) has been proven. Furthermore, the critical role of moral obligation seems obvious because people may not create a social venture if they don't feel morally motivated to help others (Ukil, Almashayekhi, and Ullah 2023).

In accordance with the above, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H4: MO has a direct and positive effect on SEI.

Perceived social support is defined as the personal belief that one can rely on the social network, such as family, friends, and others reference groups to achieve social goals (Cheng and O-Yang 2018). A higher level of perceived social support results in a feeling of belonging that helps to overcome difficult situations and to manage fear and anxiety (Sippel et al. 2015). Several researches suggested that social support is a significant determinant of SEI (Gomez Lacap, Mulyaningsih, and Ramadani 2018; Hockerts 2017; Tiwari, Bhat, and Tikoria 2022), which provides emotional support to start a social venture, because significant others may offer useful information in operating a business and dealing with social problems (Seyoum, Chinta, and Mujtaba 2021). For example, Horschburgh and Ross (2013) found that the lack of support from the social network might demotivate individuals to become social entrepreneurs. The study by Hossain, Arefin, and Yukongdi (2021) demonstrated not only the strong relationship of perceived social support with social entrepreneurial intention, but also its influence in choosing a social entrepreneurial career (see also, Hassan, Igel, and Shamsuddoha 2022). Therefore, we hypothesized:

H5: PSS has a direct and positive effect on SEI.

In the social entrepreneurship studies, particular importance has been attached to prior experiences and empathy. For example, in the study by Hockerts (2017) prior experience with social problems not only directly influenced social entrepreneurial intention, but also influenced both social entrepreneurial self-efficacy and perceived social support, which in turn improved social entrepreneurial intentions. The results of a study conducted in Bangladesh (Ashraf 2021) showed that previous experience both directly and indirectly predicts Islamic social entrepreneurial intentions. Social entrepreneurial self-efficacy has the greatest impact on both intentions and prior experience. Ip et al. (2021) in a study conducted in Taiwan also reported that prior experiences with social problems

fostered social entrepreneurial self-efficacy, moral obligation, and perceived social support, which fueled people's interest in starting a social enterprise. More recently, the authors have underlined not only the importance of prior experiences, but also of empathy in indirectly influencing nascent social behavior through self-efficacy, social support and outcome expectations (Ip et al. 2022). Existing literature suggests that an other-oriented attitude more accurately predicts behavior through individual and contextual factors, such as self-efficacy, moral obligation, and perceived social support (Aparicio-Flores et al. 2020; Pang, Song, and Ma 2022). More specifically, empathy serves as an antecedent of social entrepreneurial self-efficacy, thus influencing outcome expectations and SEI (Aparicio-Flores et al. 2020; Bacq and Alt 2018; Ip et al. 2021). It also indirectly models its own prosocial behavior through perceived social support (Fu et al. 2022).

Individuals who show high levels of empathy towards others and their needs experience less personal discomfort when faced with problematic situations (Davis 1983). As a result, they can feel more confident in their ability to help them through social entrepreneurship. Conversely, individuals who are less inclined to feel compassion for others will experience lower levels of self-efficacy which increases their sense of vulnerability. Therefore, being able to understand the points of view of others is important both to alleviate the discomfort of problematic situations and to increase the sense of confidence in one's ability to help others and engage in social entrepreneurship (Bacq and Alt 2018).

Moreover, these results appear to be in line with the results of the recent systematic review carried out on a total of 56 articles by Ambad (2022) which emphasized the direct and indirect effects of prior experience and emotional factors (including empathy) on social entrepreneurial intention.

Based on what has just been said, we have also assumed that:

H6: PESP indirectly affect social entrepreneurial intention through SES-E (H6a), MO (H6b) and PSS (H6c).

H7: EMP indirectly affect SEI through SES-E (H7a), MO (H7b) and PSS (H7c).

Moderating effect of gender and type of study

The literature on entrepreneurship has highlighted the influence of gender and type of study in the choice of an entrepreneurial career. Recent studies have shown men's supremacy in entrepreneurial intention, as well as in the choice of an entrepreneurial career (Elnadi and Gheith 2021; Haddad, Haddad, and Nagpal 2022; Hossain, Arefin, and Yukongdi 2021). For example, in setting up business ventures, men demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy and internal locus of control and family support (Molino et al. 2018). Furthermore, gender differences influence the resource allocation system in the market and female entrepreneurs are in a disadvantaged position to obtain bank loans. Financial institutions also perceive that female entrepreneurs tend to be less successful than men. Women also receive less support from family, relatives and friends as, in line with gender stereotypes, they are expected to do housework (Cardella et al. 2021).

Similarly, many authors have considered education as a key factor in forming entrepreneurial drive and intention among individuals, improves entrepreneurial ability and orientation to encourage the transition from intention to entrepreneurial behavior among university students in (Anjum et al. 2023; Draksler and Sirec 2021). Entrepreneurs with strong business studies backgrounds are more inclined to lead consumer-focused companies (Ganotakis and Love 2012). For example, in the study by Zubić, Sušan, and Sokolić (2021) it was shown that students with an economic orientation, compared to those with a non-economic orientation, achieve higher results not only in levels of entrepreneurial intention, but also in levels of entrepreneurial awareness. The basic idea is that having a familiarity and experience, thanks to the type of study chosen, could help younger people to consider such a career not only as desirable, but feasible (Hassan, Igel, and Shamsuddoha 2022). Mohamad et al. (2015) suggested that entrepreneurial education, including formal and informal education, should be incorporated in the study curriculum to foster entrepreneurial intentions.

However, in the case of social entrepreneurial intention, the results do not appear univocal and able to give satisfactory answers (Chliova, Mair, and Vernis 2020). The few studies present in the literature argue that the male-female gap tends to decrease in social entrepreneurship as a consequence of a greater predisposition of women towards social goals (Ko and Kang 2022), and a closer connection of social entrepreneurship with the characteristics feminine. For example, Hossain, Arefin, and Yukongdi (2021), analyzing the moderating role of gender in social entrepreneurial intentions showed that in terms of agreeableness, social support and social self-efficacy, males had a higher SEI level than females. In the case of conscientiousness and openness (factors closest to the female universe) the results indicated that females had a higher level of SEI than males.

Regarding the importance of training and education, the few studies in the literature have analyzed the positive effects of training courses on entrepreneurial intentions (Hassan, Igel, and Shamsuddoha 2022), but most have not made comparisons on the importance of different educational paths (different types of studies) regarding social entrepreneurial intention. We try to fill the gap in the international literature, analyzing the SEI from the point of view of gender (male vs female) and of the different educational background (economics and business sciences vs social sciences). Specifically, it was analyzed whether:

H8: Relationships between PESP (H8a), EMP (H8b), SES-E (H8c), MO (H8d) and PSS (H8e) with SEI are moderated by gender.

H9: Relationships between PESP (H9a), EMP (H9b), SES-E (H9c), MO (H9d) and PSS (H9e) with SEI are moderated by different type of study.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the research.

Methods

Participants and procedure

To investigate our proposed hypotheses, it was important to survey university students between the middle and the end of their curriculum, as it was also important that the students we interviewed in this study were given opportunities to experiment, in line with their own educational paths,

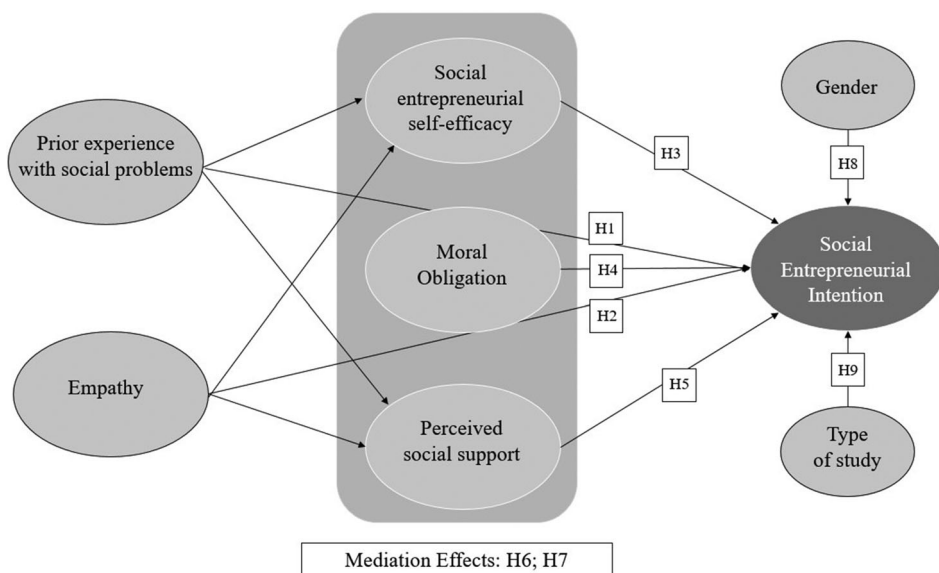


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

experiences related to social problems (students of social sciences) or experiences in entrepreneurial contexts (students of economics and business sciences), through internships and external internships, curricular courses and training programs.

The study adopted a non-probability convenience sampling procedure. Notwithstanding its generalizability issue, non-probability sampling is prevalent in entrepreneurship-related studies (Nowiński et al. 2019; Pinto Borges et al. 2021).

In this vein, Andrade (2021) argues that despite the well-acknowledged generalizability issues, non-probability sampling can result in good quality data when samples are characterized with high response rates and participation levels. It is also argued that using convenience sampling allows the researcher to ensure the appropriateness of participants (Etikan 2016). This being said, to reduce the generalizability problems, efforts were undertaken to achieve a sufficient sample size to compensate for its non-random character.

The survey was administered in the form of self-administered questionnaires distributed among the students of the University of Salamanca (Spain) in paper form during the winter semester 2021/2022.

A total of 962 students participated in the survey: 52% ($n = 500$) were social sciences students and 48% ($n = 462$) economics and business sciences students. The overall response rate exceeded 90%. Respondents differed in terms of age (Mage = 27.43 years, SD = 9.52) and gender (52% female).

Measure

The study utilized the Social Entrepreneurial Antecedents Scale (SEAS) (Hockerts 2017). The scale consisted of 19 items grouped into six factors, confirming the multidimensional structure of social entrepreneurial intention (Exploratory Factor Analysis, see details in supplementary materials). The 19 items were evaluated through a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Independent Variables:

- Prior Experience with Social Problems (items 1, 2, 3; an example of item: 'I have some experience working with social problems').
- Empathy (Items 4, 5, 6; an example of item: 'I feel compassion for socially marginalized people').

Mediator Variables:

- Moral Obligation (items 7, 8, 9, 10; an example of item: 'It is an ethical responsibility to help people less fortunate than ourselves').
- Social Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy (items 11, 12, 13; an example of item: 'I am convinced that I personally can make a contribution to address societal challenges if I put my mind to it').
- Perceived Social Support (items 14, 15, 16; an example of item: 'People would support me if I wanted to start an organization to help socially marginalized people').

Dependent Variable:

- Social Entrepreneurial Intention (items 17, 18, 19; an example of item: 'I have a preliminary idea for a social enterprise on which I plan to act in the future').

Statistical analysis

According to Hair, Howarda, and Nitzlb (2020), two-stage analytical procedures were recommended to analyze the data. In the first stage of confirmatory composite analysis (CCA), we assessed the measurement model by evaluating the estimates of internal consistency reliability and convergent

and discriminant validity. In the second stage the partial least squares (PLS) approach was used to evaluate the validity and reliability of the data, as well as, to test the hypothesis formulated.

Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) is the preferable approach when researchers focus on prediction and theory development. Secondly, PLS-SEM, unlike CBM-SEM, is robust to non-normal data, and thus is methodologically preferable when working with Likert-type scales (Hair et al. 2018).

To assess measurement invariance and therefore to analyze the moderation effects (gender and type of study), the analysis was based on the MICOM procedure by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016), which includes three steps: (1) configural invariance (equal parameterization and way of estimation), (2) compositional invariance (equal indicator weights), and (3) the equality of composite mean values and variances. If configural invariance and compositional invariance are established, partial measurement invariance is confirmed, which allows one to compare the path coefficient estimates across the groups. In addition, if partial measurement invariance holds and the composites' mean values and variances are equal across the groups, full measurement invariance is confirmed, which supports the pooled data analysis.

To estimate model relationships, we used SmartPLS 3 (Ringle, Wende, and Becker 2015) with Bootstrap resampling method (5000 re-samples).

Results

Preliminary analyses

The psychometric properties of the SEAS indicators were analyzed by examining the item-total correlation values, asymmetry, and kurtosis. The indicators showed item-total correlation coefficients above the value of 0.30 (Nunnally and Bernstein 1995), while the skewness and kurtosis values did not exceed the cut-off between -2 and $+2$ and were therefore considered acceptable (George and Mallery 2010).

Table 1 shows the statistically significant differences between groups. Specifically, females scored higher on all variables than males. Furthermore, it is important to note that, with the exception of the PESP construct, the means of social sciences students were higher than those of economics and business sciences students.

Measurement model assessment

To analyze the reliability of all constructs, this study used Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and the Dijkstra-Henseler Rho_A coefficient. As Table 2 shows, all values exceeded the 0.70 threshold value, so the reliability of the model was ensured. Furthermore, the standardized loadings should have a value equal to or greater than 0.70, loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 can be accepted if they do not lead to a strong deterioration of the model (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011). As can be seen from Figure 2 and Table 2, all factor loadings ranged from 0.63 to 0.92 and all were significant at the 0.001 level.

Table 1. Gender and type of study means differences.

	All Sample Mean (SD)	Male Mean (SD)	Female Mean (SD)	t-test	Bus. & Econ. Sc. Mean (SD)	Social Sciences Mean (SD)	t-test
PESP	2.73 (1.19)	2.57 (1.18)	2.88 (1.18)	-3.983**	2.71 (1.17)	2.75 (1.21)	-0.500
EMP	4.20 (0.76)	3.97 (0.82)	4.41 (0.62)	-9.223**	4.08 (0.80)	4.30 (0.71)	-4.484**
MO	3.92 (0.80)	3.76 (0.88)	4.07 (0.69)	-5.957**	3.86 (0.85)	3.97(0.76)	-2.154*
SES-E	3.80 (0.80)	3.66 (0.85)	3.94 (0.73)	-5.499**	3.69 (0.82)	3.91 (0.77)	-4.264**
PSS	3.15 (0.86)	3.06 (0.88)	3.23 (0.82)	-3.213**	3.06 (0.85)	3.22 (0.86)	-2.922*
SEI	2.77 (0.96)	2.64 (0.97)	2.89 (0.94)	-3.979**	2.67 (0.96)	2.86 (0.95)	-3.158*

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity for reflective constructs.

Construct	Standardized loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Rho-A	CR	AVE
All Sample					
PESP	0.85–0.87	0.829	0.833	0.897	0.744
EMP	0.82–0.88	0.812	0.841	0.887	0.723
MO	0.73–0.86	0.841	0.859	0.893	0.677
SES-E	0.76–0.86	0.756	0.778	0.859	0.671
PSS	0.69–0.91	0.797	0.830	0.883	0.718
SEI	0.78–0.85	0.776	0.782	0.870	0.691
Male					
PESP	0.83–0.87	0.814	0.818	0.889	0.728
EMP	0.75–0.87	0.777	0.865	0.864	0.679
MO	0.63–0.84	0.793	0.845	0.861	0.610
SES-E	0.74–0.84	0.749	0.771	0.855	0.663
PSS	0.69–0.92	0.799	0.833	0.884	0.679
SEI	0.75–0.85	0.754	0.766	0.859	0.671
Female					
PESP	0.83–0.87	0.814	0.818	0.889	0.728
EMP	0.75–0.87	0.777	0.865	0.864	0.679
MO	0.64–0.84	0.793	0.845	0.861	0.610
SES-E	0.74–0.84	0.749	0.771	0.855	0.663
PSS	0.69–0.92	0.799	0.833	0.884	0.679
SEI	0.80–0.86	0.798	0.808	0.881	0.712
Buss. Econ. Sc.					
PESP	0.85–0.86	0.825	0.831	0.895	0.740
EMP	0.83–0.87	0.808	0.813	0.886	0.722
MO	0.78–0.87	0.855	0.867	0.902	0.696
SES-E	0.71–0.87	0.752	0.786	0.856	0.667
PSS	0.71–0.91	0.799	0.824	0.883	0.718
SEI	0.79–0.86	0.783	0.793	0.873	0.697
Social Sc.					
PESP	0.84–0.88	0.832	0.835	0.899	0.748
EMP	0.79–0.88	0.809	0.899	0.881	0.712
MO	0.70–0.84	0.827	0.859	0.883	0.656
SES-E	0.77–0.85	0.753	0.764	0.858	0.668
PSS	0.66–0.92	0.793	0.839	0.881	0.716
SEI	0.75–0.86	0.769	0.786	0.866	0.683

Note: CR: composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted.

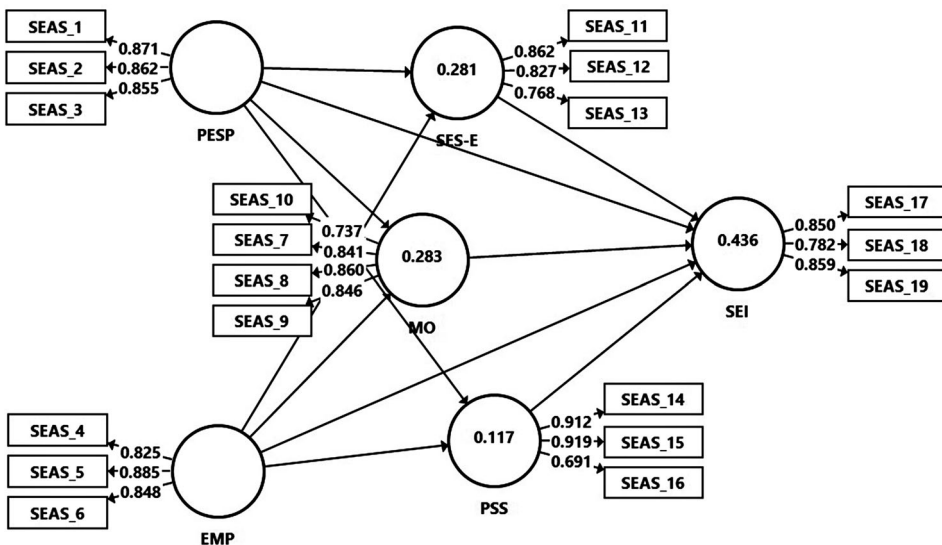


Figure 2. Measurement model: standardized factor loadings (All sample).

Convergent validity, i.e. the mean value of the square loads of the construct-related elements, was measured by the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). When the AVE is equal to or greater than 0.50 it means that the construct explains more than half of the variation of its components (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011). In our study, AVE ranged from 0.61 to 0.74, which is well above the acceptable value.

The square root of AVE was used to analyze the discriminant validity. According to Fornell-Larcker Criterion, when the shared variance within a construct (AVE) exceeds the shared variance between the constructs, discriminant validity is ensured (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The results in Table 3 confirmed the discriminant validity.

Structural model assessment and hypotheses testing

The structural model was evaluated using three indicators: Stone and Geisser test (Q^2), the coefficient of determination (R^2), and hypotheses testing. Q^2 was performed, using the blindfolding procedure, with an omission distance equal to 7. Results revealed that all Q^2 values were greater than zero (Hair et al. 2018) (SES-E = 0.186; MO = 0.184, PSS = 0.082; SEI = 0.296). In addition, the R^2 values of the endogenous constructs show that the proposed model could explain 28.1% of SES-S, 28.3% of MO, 11.7% of PSS, and 43.7% of SEI. Based on the above, the model met all the criteria, and the structural model was regarded as acceptable.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker Criterion.

Constructs	PESP	EMP	MO	SES-E	PSS	SEI
All Sample						
PESP	0.863					
EMP	0.293	0.850				
MO	0.239	0.517	0.823			
SES-E	0.427	0.430	0.397	0.819		
PSS	0.299	0.246	0.196	0.529	0.847	
SEI	0.505	0.347	0.304	0.535	0.493	0.831
Male						
PESP	0.853					
EMP	0.244	0.824				
MO	0.183	0.431	0.781			
SES-E	0.394	0.405	0.388	0.814		
PSS	0.294	0.217	0.143	0.499	0.849	
SEI	0.500	0.262	0.230	0.516	0.448	0.819
Female						
PESP	0.869					
EMP	0.299	0.849				
MO	0.260	0.525	0.844			
SES-E	0.437	0.404	0.368	0.817		
PSS	0.287	0.234	0.205	0.542	0.845	
SEI	0.495	0.379	0.338	0.531	0.522	0.844
Business Economic Sc.						
PESP	0.860					
EMP	0.297	0.850				
MO	0.269	0.496	0.835			
SES-E	0.416	0.397	0.367	0.817		
PSS	0.307	0.175	0.176	0.484	0.847	
SEI	0.500	0.328	0.328	0.520	0.517	0.835
Social Science						
PESP	0.865					
EMP	0.299	0.844				
MO	0.213	0.532	0.810			
SES-E	0.439	0.448	0.422	0.817		
PSS	0.293	0.305	0.211	0.565	0.846	
SEI	0.514	0.355	0.271	0.541	0.463	0.827

Notes: The bold number is the square root of AVE. The bold numbers listed diagonally are the square root of the variance shared between the constructs and their measures. The off-diagonal elements are the correlations among the constructs. For discriminant validity, the diagonal elements should be larger than the off-diagonal elements.

Figure 3 shows path coefficients (hypotheses H1–H7) and their statistical significance for the structural model.

The results showed that PESP and EMP contribute directly to entrepreneurial intentions (PESP: $\beta = 0.30$; $p < .001$; EMP: $\beta = 0.06$; $p = .022$), which would suggest that the H1 and H2 hypotheses are supported. With specific regard to the antecedents of the SEI, SES-E ($\beta = 0.21$; $p < .001$), MO ($\beta = .05$; $p = .030$) and PSS ($\beta = 0.25$; $p < .001$) directly and positively influenced social entrepreneurial intentions, supporting the hypotheses H3, H4 and H5.

Regarding the indirect influence, the results showed that the impact of PESP on SEI (Total indirect effect: $\beta = 0.14$; $p < .01$; C.I. [0.109; 0.175]) was completely mediated by SES-E (specific indirect effect: $\beta = .07$; $p < .01$; C.I. [0.048; 0.094]), MO (specific indirect effect: $\beta = 0.006$; $p = .04$; C.I. [0.001; 0.012]) and PSS (specific indirect effect: $\beta = 0.06$; $p < .01$; C.I. [0.047; 0.087]). Similarly, the impact of EMP on SEI (Total indirect effect: $\beta = 0.14$; $p < .01$; C.I. [0.100; 0.192]) was completely mediated by SES-E (specific indirect effect: $\beta = 0.07$; $p < .01$; C.I. [0.049; 0.097]), MO (specific indirect effect: $\beta = 0.02$; $p = .03$; C.I. [0.004; 0.054]) and PSS (specific indirect effect: $\beta = 0.04$; $p < .01$; C.I. [0.029; 0.065]). These results allow us to demonstrate full support for hypotheses H6 and H7, which affirmed the indirect and positive influence (mediated by SES-E; MO, and PSS) of PESP and EMP on students' social entrepreneurial intention.

Moderating effect of gender and type of study

Once the model invariance for gender (male Vs female) and type of studies (social sciences Vs economics and business sciences) has been established (MICOM procedure; see details in supplementary materials), a multigroup analysis (MGA; Hair et al. 2018; Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2016) was performed to verify the hypotheses H8 and H9.

According to Henseler and Fassott (2010), through multigroup analysis it is possible to analyze the moderating effects of one or more variables. In this sense, each group was estimated separately and

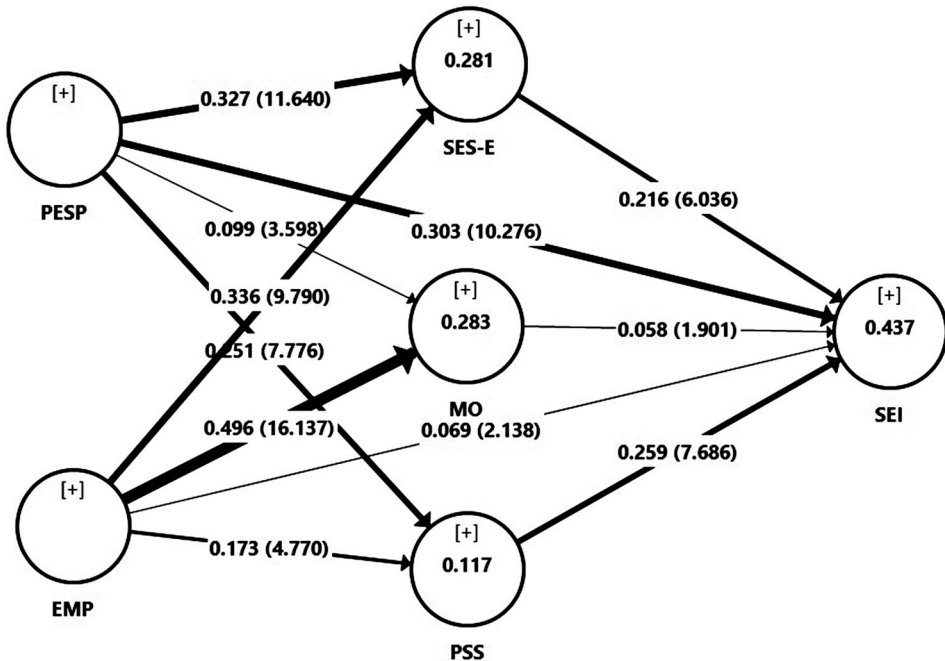


Figure 3. Structural model.

statistically significant differences in path coefficients were interpreted as moderating effects. Henseler's approach was used for the comparison between groups, a very rigorous approach which indicates significant differences between groups when these are less than 0.05 or greater than 0.95 (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2016).

As Table 4 shows, gender had a moderating effect only regarding the direct influence of EMP on SEI ($p > 0.95$), to the advantage of females. This implies that the relationships between antecedents and social entrepreneurial intentions are not uniform among men and women, while they are uniform among business and economics students and social science students. So we partially accept hypothesis H8 (H8b), while rejecting hypothesis H9.

Discussion and implications

In this article, we have focused on analyzing the antecedents of higher education students' social entrepreneurial intention, which is considered in international literature as the most important antecedent of entrepreneurial behavior (Ajzen 1991).

Starting from the latest systematic reviews (e.g. Cardella et al. 2021; Gupta et al. 2020; Hota, Subramanian, and Narayanamurthy 2020; Tan, Pham, and Bui 2021), which emphasize the need to take into account different antecedents of social entrepreneurial intention, compared to traditional entrepreneurship, and trying to address the gap in the literature regarding the role of demographic variables in the creation of social entrepreneurial intention (Tan, Le, and Xuan 2020), we conducted this study from two different perspectives.

First, and in line with several authors (Li et al. 2020; Shahzad et al. 2021), we wanted to move away from the traditional vision of entrepreneurial intention, anchored to some factors that appear typically masculine, for example men show greater independence, risk propensity and autonomy than women (Robb and Watson 2012) and the perception that male entrepreneurs are more capable (Chowdhury, Endres, and Frye 2019). In our study, we analyzed situational and psychological factors that also embrace the 'female universe'.

In line with previous studies, the results showed that PESP and EMP have a direct and positive influence on SEI (Aloulou and Algarni 2022; Bazan et al. 2020; Tiwari, Bhat, and Tikoria 2022). Furthermore, SES-E, MO, PSS were considered as antecedents of SEI since, in addition to directly influencing social entrepreneurial intention, they mediated the links between PESP-SEI and EMP-SEI (Ip et al. 2022).

These are extremely important results, because if on the one hand, they contribute to international literature by deepening the role of the antecedents of social entrepreneurial intention (Bastida et al. 2020; Chipeta, Kruse, and Surujlal 2020), on the other hand, they are factors related to 'proximity' and that seem less focused on a male vision of the entrepreneurial dynamics. In fact, and this is certainly the most innovative aspect of this study, contrary to what happens for traditional entrepreneurship where there is a male supremacy, in our study no substantial differences were found in the levels of social entrepreneurial intention between males and females.

Table 4. PLS-MGA across gender and type of study.

	Gender (Male – Female)		Type of Study (Business & Economics Sc. – Social Science)		
	Path Coeff. Differ.	<i>p</i> -Value Henseler's MGA	Path Coeff. Differ.	<i>p</i> -Value Henseler's MGA	
PESP-SEI	0.045	0.224	–0.044	.772	
EMP-SEI	–0.110	0.955	–0.001	.504	
SES-E-SEI	0.100	0.081	–0.060	.804	
MO-SEI	–0.046	0.785	0.079	.095	
PSS-SEI	–0.096	0.924	0.110	.050	

(Continued)

Furthermore, gender has moderated the effect of EMP on SEI, to the benefit of women. These are results that should not be underestimated and that could bring women closer to the choice of an entrepreneurial career and overcome the gender prejudice that, according to the data in the literature, would still exist today (Rubio-Bañón and Esteban-Lloret 2016; Shinnar, Giacomini, and Janssen 2012).

The results obtained in this study are in line with the literature (Hechevarría et al. 2012; Nicolás and Rubio 2016; Themudo 2009) which demonstrated that the factors promoting social entrepreneurial intention seem closer to the universe of women who perceive social enterprises as more appropriate to their motivations (Yamini, Soloveva, and Peng 2000), their values, oriented towards community care and support (Bastida et al. 2020) and their social goals, unlike men whose attitudes push towards more economic and material themes (Dorado and Ventresca 2013).

Social entrepreneurship, in this sense, could be considered a tool to address the disparities in the involvement of women in entrepreneurial activities (for example, Jeong and Yoo 2022). Therefore, policies aimed at overcoming gender inequality should also involve various aspects related to the world of female entrepreneurship. It should be noted that this does not mean that the other dimensions are irrelevant to women's entrepreneurial careers, but rather they may not be as crucial in developing their entrepreneurial intentions. Therefore, programs in higher education designed to improve gender inequality would be more effective if they focus on these aspects of entrepreneurship.

Second, we analyzed social entrepreneurial intention with an emphasis on the influence of different types of educational pathways. Previous studies have underlined the importance of entrepreneurship education in building and developing entrepreneurial intentions (Anjum et al. 2023; Zubić, Sušan, and Sokolić 2021). For example, Hassan, Igel, and Shamsuddoha (2022) demonstrated a significant positive relationship between entrepreneurship education and students' social entrepreneurial intention on the one hand and between entrepreneurship education and the entrepreneurial social network on the other hand.

Surprisingly and in contrast to what happens with traditional entrepreneurship (Anjum et al. 2023; Zubić, Sušan, and Sokolić 2021), in our study, an education closer to economics and business studies did not influence the levels of social entrepreneurial intention. This could mean that entrepreneurship education is designed to increase interest in traditional entrepreneurial activity, rather than to equip students with specific skills which could focus on the social dimensions of entrepreneurial activity. Given the growing importance of social entrepreneurship as a different form of entrepreneurship, especially to counter the current economic crisis, it could be useful for educators and trainers to include in higher education programs useful constructs to develop or support skills and knowledge closer to the social sphere.

From a theoretical point of view, this study has important implications as it empirically validates the role of PEPS and EMP in the development of social entrepreneurial intention; contributes to the flow of social entrepreneurship literature, providing a holistic approach showing the impact of both individual and situational factors on the SEI, and shedding light on the mediating role of SES-E, MO and PSS on the relationship between PSPS-SEI and EMP-SEI of higher education institutions, and finally, it adds significantly to the limited research on gender and education issues in social entrepreneurship processes, demonstrating a reduction of the male-female gap in social entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial education mainly anchored in a 'traditional' vision of entrepreneurship.

From a practical point of view, this study has important implications for academic and governmental institutions.

On the one hand, considering the important role of individual factors in strengthening students' SEI, educators should motivate and support the student to build his/her confidence and share positive experiences to undertake entrepreneurial functions. In this sense, it could be useful to support the development of skills and abilities closer to the socio-emotional universe of students and to promote their civic character, with the aim of obtaining important practical insights into social business. Furthermore, educational institutions should enrich their educational paths with external

practical activities, as well as volunteering activities, to provide an excellent opportunity to understand, learn and enrich knowledge and skills.

On the other hand, this study underlined the importance of situational factors such as perceived social support. School administrators should strengthen the construction of higher education support system, so that students can feel a positive psychological and cultural atmosphere. Creating a good supportive environment for both peers and the trainer, as well as encouraging students to be more involved in their learning, also contributes to the development of altruistic behaviors aimed at helping others. Practical experiences of alumni engaged in social practices, serving as positive role models can also help students to tackle social problems and provide solutions with innovative ideas and assist them in the development of social enterprise.

Furthermore, government should promote collaborations with international partners. It is recommended that responsible agencies provide platforms for networking, matching and knowledge exchange among young people and social entrepreneurs for a better understanding of their opportunities. Recently, Sahasranamam and Nandakumar (2020) have highlighted and identified the contingent role of formal institutions on the creation of social enterprises. Social entrepreneurs can bring social innovation through products and services (Dwivedi and Weerawardena 2018), therefore the role of formal institutions is crucial to promote such activities through the provision of incentives and resources, which can ultimately bring about social change and create more jobs. What we emphasize in this study is the importance of collaboration between different Institutions to promote knowledge sharing and awareness among students and society at large. The exchange of ideas and the promotion of collaboration can only be done through the synergistic action between partners such as university and government which, despite their different responsibilities, support the development of social entrepreneurship, both in higher education and in terms of extra-curricular practices, to ensure skills development, and increase students' awareness of social and environmental issues, as well as self-confidence as agents of social change.

There is still much to learn to fully understand the processes leading to the decision to become a social entrepreneur, however, the findings presented in this study underscore the importance of the interplay between individual and situational factors influencing the decision to become an entrepreneur society, taking into account gender differences and educational background.

Limitations and direction for research

This study has some limitations that may be reflection points for future research. First, as we discussed extensively in the first part of the study, social entrepreneurship depends not only on psychological and personality factors, but also on contextual and cultural factors. Despite the importance of the present work, our results cannot be generalized as we have not explored the cultural component in our study. In this sense, it could be interesting for future research to analyze the entrepreneurial intentions from different social and cultural backgrounds. For example, what happens in developing economies? Or again, are there any geographical differences between developed countries? And within the same country?

Second, research on traditional entrepreneurship has found differences between entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial families. Can the same be said with social entrepreneurship? That is to say, are there differences in levels of social entrepreneurial intention between the children of entrepreneurs and the children of employees? It would be helpful for future research to look into this aspect further.

Furthermore, although intention is considered the best predictor of behavior, our study may represent a limitation for academics who are more interested in entrepreneurial behavior. In this sense, it would be important to make comparisons between different groups, for example students and nascent social entrepreneurs to analyze which antecedents come into play. Are some factors more helpful in the initial stages of setting up a business than others? Are the factors supporting

social entrepreneurial intention also important in the later stage of enterprise creation? What dynamics actually come into play in social entrepreneurial behavior?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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