

The Gig Economy and Young Graduates' Career Preferences: Between Freelancing and the Entrepreneurial Mindset

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Abstract

The expansion of the gig economy has introduced freelancing as a compelling career path for university graduates seeking autonomy, flexibility, and value-aligned work. However, the transition from traditional employment aspirations to freelance entrepreneurship is shaped by complex psychological and social mechanisms that remain underexplored. This study develops and tests a structural model of freelance entrepreneurial intention by integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) with entrepreneurial identity and self-efficacy. Data were collected from 254 university graduates and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results demonstrate that attitude toward freelancing, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly influence the development of entrepreneurial identity. Entrepreneurial identity, in turn, strongly predicts the intention to pursue freelance work. While perceived behavioral control also directly affects intention, self-efficacy shows limited influence, suggesting that role internalization and social validation are more critical than confidence alone. Interestingly, subjective norms affect intention indirectly through identity rather than directly. This study contributes to entrepreneurship research by highlighting identity as a key mediating mechanism within non-traditional entrepreneurial pathways. The findings have practical implications for universities, policy-makers, and platform providers aiming to support sustainable freelance careers. Interventions emphasizing identity development—alongside skills and opportunity access—may better equip graduates to navigate the uncertainties of gig-based self-employment.

Keywords: freelance entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial identity; Theory of Planned Behavior; gig economy; self-efficacy

A. INTRODUCTION

The accelerated expansion of the gig economy—propelled by platform-based technologies, algorithmic intermediation, and the normalization of remote collaboration—has fundamentally redefined the nature and meaning of work. Nowhere is this transformation more visible than among university graduates, who are increasingly rejecting traditional, hierarchical employment models in favor of freelance careers that offer autonomy, flexibility, and value-aligned professional engagement (Dunumadalawa et al., 2024; Gussek & Wiesche, 2024). In both developed and emerging economies, freelancing has emerged not as a fringe alternative but as a strategic career choice, particularly during COVID-19 disruptions that forced a global reevaluation of work norms and labor market participation (Braesemann et al., 2022). This shift reflects a broader ideological transition in which work is not merely a means of economic survival but a domain for self-expression, lifestyle integration, and the pursuit of purpose (Sa'adah et al., 2023).

At the same time, the gig economy rewards and amplifies 21st-century competencies—such as adaptability, digital fluency, and entrepreneurial agility—increasing freelancers' employability and enabling transnational labor fluidity. Unlike conventional employment models, freelancing allows individuals to signal quality through digital reputations, building social capital in decentralized, client-facing marketplaces (Beerepoot et al., 2023). However, despite its allure, transitioning from conventional employment aspirations to freelance entrepreneurship remains cognitively and emotionally complex, especially for early-career professionals. Psychological barriers such as income uncertainty, social invisibility, and relational overload—manifested in the stress of client acquisition, boundary management, and project-based instability—continue to hinder confident entry into freelance ecosystems (Blyth et al., 2022; Jayasankar & Sumathi, 2023). For many, particularly those with limited social capital, freelancing

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is perceived not as an empowered choice but as precarious work borne out of necessity—a perception often reinforced by familial or peer-based skepticism (Pulignano et al., 2023).

Moreover, structural constraints are compounded by skill-based gaps. While digital tools lower entry barriers, sustaining a freelance career still demands entrepreneurial capabilities—from personal branding and platform navigation to client negotiation and financial self-management (Flatøy, 2024; Rexhepi et al., 2024). These multidimensional obstacles expose the limitations of existing graduate preparation systems, which tend to prioritize employability within formal labor markets rather than autonomous entrepreneurial agencies in non-traditional contexts. Although the literature on entrepreneurial intention is well-developed, much of it has treated entrepreneurship as a monolithic construct—largely overlooking the specificities of freelancing as a distinct, identity-driven, and platform-mediated form of self-employment. While constructs such as entrepreneurial attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control remain central within the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), they insufficiently explain the psychological transitions required to legitimize freelance entrepreneurship as a meaningful career (Gielnik et al., 2016; Hsu et al., 2023). In particular, entrepreneurial identity—the cognitive self-schema through which individuals make sense of themselves as entrepreneurs—has received insufficient attention despite growing evidence of its predictive relevance for persistence, motivation, and role alignment in uncertain work environments (Ahmed & Lucianetti, 2024). Similarly, while self-efficacy has been shown to correlate with entrepreneurial action, its interaction with peer norms, social support systems, and digital labor contexts remains poorly theorized (Bhardwaj & Sergeeva, 2022; Chakraborty & Biswal, 2023). The absence of identity-anchored, context-sensitive models leaves a critical gap in understanding how graduates internalize and enact the freelancer role in a gig-based economy.

This study addresses that gap by developing and empirically testing a structural model of freelance entrepreneurial intention among university graduates. The model integrates the core components of TPB—attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—with two critical psychological constructs: entrepreneurial identity and self-efficacy. It moves beyond the intention-as-choice paradigm and toward an identity-based understanding of entrepreneurial emergence in the freelance domain. By uncovering both direct and mediated pathways from perception to intention, the study contributes to a more granular understanding of how graduates psychologically transition into self-employment, particularly in fragmented, algorithmically managed labor markets.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Attitude Toward Freelancing and Freelance Based Entrepreneurial Intention

Attitude plays a central role in shaping graduates' perceptions and intentions toward freelancing as a career choice. As work evolves in the gig economy, freelancing has shifted from being viewed as informal or unstable to being recognized as a legitimate form of self-employment, particularly among younger generations. This transformation is driven by the appeal of flexibility, autonomy, and self-realization that freelancing offers (Coetzee, 2023; Kobayashi & Hazra, 2024). Graduates who perceive freelancing as personally fulfilling and aligned with their professional values are more inclined to pursue it as a serious career path. Moreover, in economies marked by high youth unemployment and labor market instability, freelancing is increasingly seen as an alternative and a proactive and strategic career choice (Coetzee, 2023). The notion of a portfolio career—blending employment, self-employment, and freelancing—further reinforces this attitudinal shift toward a more flexible and individualized approach to work.

Despite growing acceptance, skepticism remains—particularly regarding income stability and long-term career progression—which may hinder some graduates from fully embracing freelancing as a viable future (Nawaz et al., 2024). Overcoming these concerns is essential in fostering a mindset where freelancing is viewed as a legitimate and rewarding entrepreneurial pathway rather than a fallback. Empirical findings affirm that a strong positive attitude toward freelancing is significantly associated with entrepreneurial intention (Kobayashi & Hazra, 2024). Understanding the attitudinal dimension becomes crucial in identifying why some graduates transition more confidently into freelance entrepreneurship than others.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Attitude toward freelancing significantly influences the intention to become a freelance-based entrepreneur.

Attitude Toward Freelancing and Entrepreneurial Identity

Attitude toward freelancing refers to an individual's overall evaluation—favorable or unfavorable—of freelancing as a career path. This attitudinal orientation is formed through beliefs about the desirability, value, and potential benefits of working independently, such as autonomy, flexibility, and self-direction (Coetzee, 2023; Kobayashi & Hazra, 2024). When graduates view freelancing as a meaningful, viable, and respectable form of employment, these positive evaluations increase their intention to act and shape how they perceive themselves concerning the entrepreneurial world. In this way, attitude goes beyond intention and becomes a foundation for entrepreneurial identity construction, especially in contexts where formal entrepreneurial roles are self-created and not institutionally defined.

The formation of entrepreneurial identity is strongly influenced by one's internalization of positive career attitudes. Individuals who view freelancing as empowering and aligned with their personal and professional goals are likelier to adopt the entrepreneurial role as part of their self-concept. Research shows that favorable attitudes toward entrepreneurship correlate with increased identification as an entrepreneur as individuals begin to see themselves as proactive, self-directed, and opportunity-oriented (Lan et al., 2024; Wang & Yu, 2023). In freelance settings—where the boundary between self-employment and entrepreneurship is fluid—this identity formation becomes essential for legitimizing one's career and sustaining entrepreneurial engagement.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Attitude toward freelancing significantly influences entrepreneurial identity.

Subjective Norms and Entrepreneurial Identity

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social expectations from significant others—such as family, peers, and mentors—regarding an individual's career decisions. These social influences often play a decisive role for recent graduates navigating a transitional life. In the context of the gig economy, where freelancing is gaining legitimacy, attitudes from traditional social circles may still reflect skepticism, framing it as less stable or less prestigious than conventional employment. These social perceptions shape how individuals evaluate freelancing as a career path and influence whether they consider it a valid and respected professional choice (Nawaz et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2023). One's immediate social environment regards the more positively freelancing, the more likely individuals are to internalize that validation into their self-concept and career identity.

This internalization process is fundamental to the development of entrepreneurial identity. When individuals receive encouragement and approval to pursue freelance careers, they are more inclined to adopt the mindset and behaviors associated with entrepreneurship. In contrast, when freelancing is viewed as a fallback or inferior option, individuals may hesitate to embrace it as part of their professional identity. Studies have shown that social validation enhances entrepreneurial self-efficacy and contributes to the confidence required to navigate non-traditional career paths (Eslami & Hooshmandi, 2023; Gollmitzer, 2024; Олешко & Mukhina, 2022). In environments where freelancing is socially accepted, graduates are more likely to feel empowered in their choices and develop a clearer sense of entrepreneurial identity.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Subjective norms positively affect the development of entrepreneurial identity.

Perceived Behavioral Control and Entrepreneurial Identity

While perceived behavioral control is widely recognized for its influence on behavioral intention, its role in shaping entrepreneurial self-perception is equally significant. In the freelance context, individuals who believe they can manage the uncertainties and demands of independent work—such as project management, client acquisition, and financial planning—are more likely to view themselves as capable entrepreneurs. This perceived control facilitates a shift in identity, particularly among graduates navigating non-traditional career paths with limited institutional support (Lan et al., 2024). Such a transformation enables individuals to internalize the entrepreneurial role more fully, reinforcing self-perception as freelancers and entrepreneurs.

This identity shift can be further understood through social cognitive theory, which emphasizes that beliefs about one's capabilities shape both actions and identity. Empowered by their perceived control, graduates are more likely to commit to entrepreneurial roles and persist through challenges (Liao et al.,

2022). Studies show that this psychological empowerment leads to "identity work"—legitimizing one's self-concept in a professional domain (Yani, 2024). In freelance careers, this identity work helps graduates reconceptualize freelancing as entrepreneurship rather than informal labor, which increases their willingness to take risks and engage meaningfully in the gig economy (Lijia, 2023).

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Perceived behavioral control positively influences entrepreneurial identity.

Self-Efficacy and Entrepreneurial Outcomes

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's internal belief in their capacity to succeed in specific tasks or contexts. Within the freelance domain, this belief system plays a crucial role in shaping how graduates approach challenges such as negotiating with clients, pricing services, managing rejections, and navigating unstable workflows (Панић & Janković–Milić, 2022). Unlike perceived behavioral control, which can involve external resources or constraints, self-efficacy is internally driven and rooted in personal conviction. Individuals with high self-efficacy demonstrate greater resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to engage in innovative problem-solving—traits essential to entrepreneurial success in freelance settings (Enongene & Isoh, 2024). These qualities also support the development of an entrepreneurial mindset, reinforcing confidence in one's ability to thrive in independent, project-based work environments.

In addition to influencing behavioral outcomes, self-efficacy is closely linked to forming entrepreneurial identity. Individuals who perceive themselves as capable are likelier to internalize the entrepreneurial role, aligning their self-concept with entrepreneurial aspirations (Seo et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2022). Research shows that entrepreneurial self-efficacy correlates positively with intending to engage in entrepreneurship and the psychological identity of an entrepreneur (Isfahani et al., 2022). Educational interventions designed to enhance entrepreneurial skills have been shown to bolster self-efficacy, further increasing entrepreneurial motivation (Lin et al., 2024; Pang et al., 2025). In this way, fostering self-efficacy strengthens career intention and promotes deeper identification with the entrepreneurial path, particularly in freelance careers.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Self-efficacy positively influences entrepreneurial identity.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Self-efficacy positively influences freelance entrepreneurial intention.

Subjective Norms and Freelance Entrepreneurial Intention

Subjective norms refer to individuals' perceptions of the social expectations and approval from significant others—such as family, friends, peers, and mentors—regarding a particular behavior or decision. Social influence plays a pivotal role in career choices, especially for recent graduates entering the workforce. In some circles, the increasing normalization of freelancing contrasts with lingering skepticism in more traditional social environments, particularly in cultures where stable employment is seen as ideal (Nawaz et al., 2024). When freelancing is endorsed and validated by one's social network, individuals are more likely to feel confident and supported in choosing this path, which increases their likelihood of forming intentions to pursue freelance entrepreneurship (Eslami & Hooshmandi, 2023).

Moreover, subjective norms do not only influence whether freelancing is socially acceptable—they also impact motivation and perceived legitimacy. Social support can validate freelancing as a worthy entrepreneurial pursuit and reduce psychological barriers such as fear of failure or social judgment. Studies show that individuals who perceive stronger normative support are more inclined to translate positive perceptions into actual behavioral intentions, particularly in self-directed careers like freelancing (Gollmitzer, 2024; Pham et al., 2023). In cultures or communities where entrepreneurship is encouraged, and freelancing is viewed as a modern expression, individuals are more likely to internalize and act upon these values.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Subjective norms significantly influence freelance-based entrepreneurial intention.

Perceived Behavioral Control and Freelance-based Entrepreneurial Intention

Perceived behavioral control refers to an individual's perception of their capability to perform specific behaviors, considering the resources, skills, and potential obstacles involved. In freelancing, this construct encompasses self-discipline, time management, client acquisition, and task execution. When graduates believe they can effectively manage these elements, they are more likely to view freelancing as a feasible and attractive career option (Putra et al., 2024). Research suggests that individuals with high

perceived behavioral control tend to exhibit entrepreneurial traits such as proactive planning and calculated risk-taking, fostering stronger career intention toward self-employment (Jin et al., 2023).

This sense of control boosts motivation and reduces fear and uncertainty associated with non-traditional career paths like freelancing. It reinforces confidence in one's ability to navigate challenges such as income variability, client expectations, and personal branding. Studies consistently show that perceived behavioral control significantly predicts entrepreneurial intention by fostering a belief in one's ability to succeed independently (Kurjono, 2022; Li et al., 2023). Moreover, individuals who perceive greater control over their skills and resources are likelier to act on entrepreneurial impulses, highlighting the construct's central role in shaping behavioral intentions.

Hypothesis 8 (H8): Perceived behavioral control positively influences freelance entrepreneurial intention.

Entrepreneurial Identity and Freelance Entrepreneurial Intention

The entrepreneurial identity reflects how strongly an individual perceives themselves as an entrepreneur, and this self-concept significantly shapes their motivations, behaviors, and long-term career decisions. In freelance contexts—where individuals often lack formal organizational structures—identity becomes a critical internal anchor that legitimizes non-traditional work as entrepreneurial rather than informal (Liu & Singhdong, 2024). A well-developed entrepreneurial identity enhances an individual's commitment to entrepreneurial goals, increases persistence in uncertainty, and fosters proactive career planning. This psychological positioning is particularly important for graduates navigating freelancing, as it reinforces their sense of agency and career ownership.

Studies have consistently shown that entrepreneurial identity is decisive in fostering entrepreneurial intention. Individuals internalizing the entrepreneurial role are more likely to pursue behaviors aligned with that identity, such as seeking clients, building networks, and investing in skill development (Wu et al., 2022). Furthermore, entrepreneurial identity not only mediates the effects of external influences like social norms and self-efficacy but also operates as a direct motivator for action (Purmono, 2023; Wang & Yu, 2023). In the freelance economy—where career paths are self-constructed—identity is a central mechanism for translating self-perception into entrepreneurial behavior.

Hypothesis 9 (H9): Entrepreneurial identity positively influences freelance entrepreneurial intention.

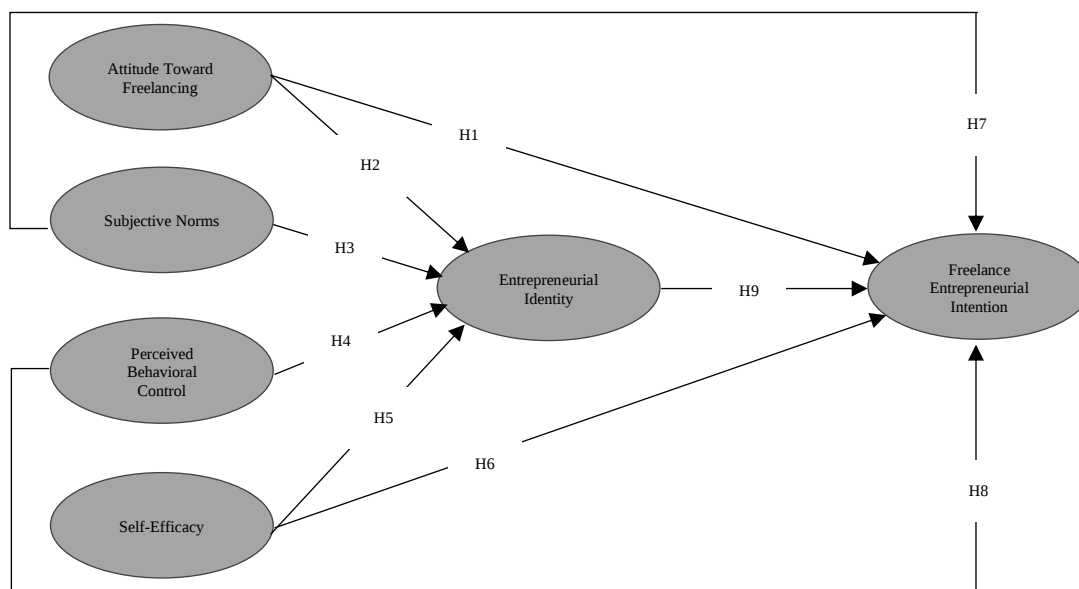


Figure 1. Proposed Framework

Source: Research data, 2025

C. METHODS

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional approach to examine the antecedents of freelance entrepreneurial intention among university graduates. The study employs Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to explore direct and mediated relationships among variables by integrating constructs from the Theory of Planned Behavior and entrepreneurial identity theory. The primary goal is to test the influence of psychological and social factors—such as attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial identity—on the intention to pursue a freelance-based entrepreneurial career. The target population comprises final-year students and recent university graduates, as these individuals are most likely to be making active career decisions, including considering freelance work. A total of 254 valid responses were collected using purposive sampling. This sample size satisfies the recommended threshold for SEM-PLS analysis, which requires at least 10 times the number of indicators for the most complex construct. Data were gathered using an online questionnaire distributed via academic mailing lists, alumni groups, and digital platforms such as LinkedIn and WhatsApp academic communities. Before data collection, respondents were screened to confirm their familiarity with freelancing and status as final-year or recent graduates.

All latent constructs in the proposed model are modeled as reflective, and each construct is measured using three indicators adapted from validated instruments in prior entrepreneurial intention and freelancing literature. Respondents rated each item using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). These indicators and their measurement properties will be further elaborated in the measurement model section of the results. The collected data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4, involving two main stages: measurement model evaluation and structural model evaluation. The measurement model was assessed for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability (via Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability), convergent validity (via Average Variance Extracted), and discriminant validity (using HTMT ratio). Following the construct validity and reliability confirmation, the structural model was evaluated through bootstrapping (5,000 subsamples) to test the significance of path coefficients. Additional assessments included the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and model fit (via Standardized Root Mean Square Residual or SRMR). The analytical strategy ensures robustness in examining both the direct and mediated effects hypothesized in the conceptual framework.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile

The study involved 254 respondents, comprising final-year university students and recent graduates across various academic disciplines. Most respondents were between 21 and 25 years old, representing the typical age group of early-career individuals exploring freelance opportunities. In terms of gender distribution, female participants made up 58.3% of the sample, while male participants accounted for 41.7%, reflecting a relatively balanced representation. Most respondents held at least an undergraduate degree or were in the process of completing one, with 74.4% indicating that they had completed their undergraduate studies, and the remaining 25.6% were in their final academic year. When asked about prior exposure to freelancing, 62.6% of respondents reported having had some form of freelance experience, such as project-based work, part-time consulting, or digital gigs. The remaining 37.4% had not yet engaged in freelance work but expressed familiarity with freelance platforms or interest in pursuing it post-graduation. In terms of academic background, the respondents were drawn from diverse fields, with concentrations in business and management (32.7%), information technology and computer science (26.8%), communication and media (18.5%), and other disciplines including education, law, and arts (22.0%). This multidisciplinary composition enhances the generalizability of the study's findings across different freelance domains. Overall, the demographic profile supports the study's objective of capturing insights from a segment of the population most relevant to freelance career exploration in the contemporary gig economy.

Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to ensure the reliability and validity of all reflective constructs before proceeding to structural model analysis. This evaluation includes assessments of indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. All constructs in the model are modeled reflectively. Indicator reliability is confirmed through the outer loadings of each item on its respective construct. As recommended by (Hair et al., 2021), outer loadings greater than 0.70 indicate that the item contributes substantially to measuring the latent variable. All items in this study

demonstrate strong loadings, ranging from 0.836 to 0.917, confirming their adequacy for further analysis. The detailed indicator loadings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicator Loadings and Item Descriptions

Variable	Code	Indicator Statement	Loading
Attitude toward Freelancing (ATT)	ATT1	Freelancing is an attractive career choice.	0.853
	ATT2	I believe freelancing offers personal and professional fulfillment.	0.875
	ATT3	I have a positive view of freelancing as a long-term career.	0.894
Subjective Norms (SN)	SN1	My family supports my intention to freelance.	0.895
	SN2	My peers think freelancing is a good career move.	0.887
	SN3	People important to me encourage freelance work.	0.845
Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)	PBC1	I am confident in my ability to freelance successfully.	0.863
	PBC2	I can manage the challenges of freelancing.	0.895
	PBC3	I believe I have control over my freelance career path.	0.881
Self-Efficacy (SE)	SE1	I can handle unexpected problems in freelance work.	0.862
	SE2	I can remain productive even when tasks are difficult.	0.894
	SE3	I feel capable of developing a freelance career.	0.896
Entrepreneurial Identity (EI)	EI1	I consider myself an entrepreneurial person.	0.912
	EI2	Being an entrepreneur is an important part of who I am.	0.917
	EI3	I identify with people who are self-employed or freelance entrepreneurs.	0.916
Freelance Entrepreneurial Intention (FEI)	FEI1	I intend to pursue a freelance career.	0.862
	FEI2	I am planning to offer freelance services after graduation.	0.836
	FEI3	I will take steps toward becoming a freelance-based entrepreneur.	0.875

Source: Research data, 2025

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). All values exceed the threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Convergent validity was evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), where all constructs exceed the minimum requirement of 0.50, meaning that each construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators. These results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Composite Reliability, Cronbach's Alpha, and AVE

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Attitude toward Freelancing (ATT)	0.846	0.907	0.764
Entrepreneurial Identity (EI)	0.903	0.939	0.837
Freelance Entrepreneurial Intention (FEI)	0.822	0.893	0.736
Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)	0.860	0.915	0.782
Self-Efficacy (SE)	0.854	0.911	0.774
Subjective Norms (SN)	0.848	0.908	0.767

Source: Research data, 2025

This study adopts the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT), a more robust and conservative method than the traditional Fornell–Larcker criterion to assess discriminant validity. According to (Ringle et al., 2020), HTMT values should be below 0.90 to confirm that constructs are empirically distinct. As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values fall well below this threshold, confirming that discriminant validity is satisfactorily established.

Table 3. Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	ATT	EI	FEI	PBC	SE
EI	0.694				
FEI	0.636	0.655			
PBC	0.591	0.540	0.640		
SE	0.644	0.475	0.530	0.580	
SN	0.701	0.814	0.557	0.494	0.562

Source: Research data, 2025

Based on the results of indicator loadings, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity via HTMT, the measurement model can be considered statistically valid and reliable, supporting its suitability for further evaluation of the structural model and hypothesis testing.

Structural Models Evaluation

The structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships between constructs and assess the model's explanatory power. Key criteria used in this evaluation include path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). The significance of the relationships was

tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 4 and Figure 2. Several key relationships were found to be statistically significant. Subjective Norms (SN) had the strongest positive effect on Entrepreneurial Identity (EI) ($\beta = 0.528$, $t = 12.034$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that perceived social approval plays a substantial role in shaping entrepreneurial self-concept. Attitude Toward Freelancing (ATT) also positively influenced both EI ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$) and Freelance Entrepreneurial Intention (FEI) ($\beta = 0.166$, $p = 0.014$), highlighting its dual effect on cognition and intention. Likewise, Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) was significantly associated with EI ($\beta = 0.154$, $p < 0.001$) and FEI ($\beta = 0.272$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the relevance of perceived capability in entrepreneurial outcomes.

Entrepreneurial Identity (EI) itself was a strong predictor of FEI ($\beta = 0.302$, $p < 0.001$), supporting its central role in linking psychological antecedents to behavioral intentions. However, Self-Efficacy (SE) did not significantly affect EI ($\beta = -0.046$, $p = 0.339$), and its effect on FEI was marginally significant ($\beta = 0.099$, $p = 0.051$), suggesting that self-efficacy may play a more indirect or conditional role. Meanwhile, Subjective Norms (SN) had no significant direct effect on FEI ($\beta = -0.008$, $p = 0.904$), implying that its impact on intention may be primarily mediated through identity.

Table 4. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hipotesis	β	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
H1: ATT $\rightarrow$ FEI	0.166	2.462	0.014	Accepted
H2: ATT $\rightarrow$ EI	0.244	4.781	0.000	Accepted
H3: SN $\rightarrow$ EI	0.528	12.034	0.000	Accepted
H4: PBC $\rightarrow$ EI	0.154	3.576	0.000	Accepted
H5: SE $\rightarrow$ EI	-0.046	0.956	0.339	Rejected
H6: SE $\rightarrow$ FEI	0.099	1.956	0.051	Accepted
H7: SN $\rightarrow$ FEI	-0.008	0.120	0.904	Rejected
H8: PBC $\rightarrow$ FEI	0.272	5.792	0.000	Accepted
H9: EI $\rightarrow$ FEI	0.302	4.642	0.000	Accepted

Source: research data, 2025

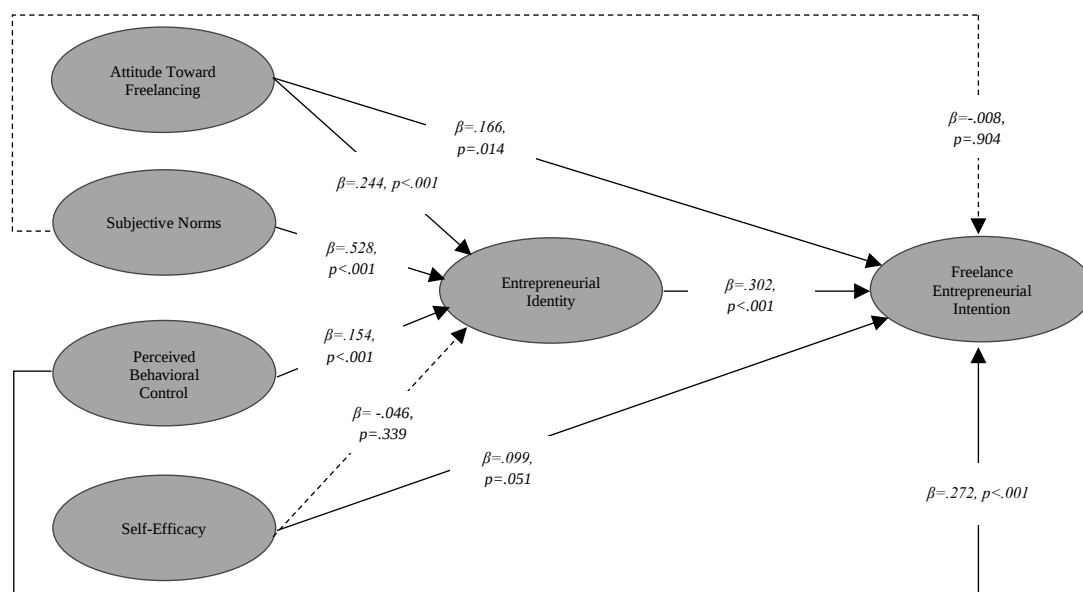


Figure 2. Evaluated Structural Model

Source: Research data, 2025

The R^2 values reflect the proportion of variance explained by the predictors. For Entrepreneurial Identity (EI), the R^2 is 0.581, indicating that ATT, SN, PBC, and SE explain 58.1% of the variance. For Freelance Entrepreneurial Intention (FEI), the R^2 is 0.449, suggesting moderate explanatory power. Additionally, predictive relevance was evaluated through Q^2 values. According to (Hair et al., 2021), a Q^2 value greater than 0 indicates predictive relevance. The Q^2 values for EI (0.480) and FEI (0.318) support the conclusion that the model has substantial predictive capability.

Table 5. Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Q^2 Predictive Relevance
Entrepreneurial Identity (EI)	0.581	0.577	0.480
Freelance Entrepreneurial Intention (FEI)	0.449	0.443	0.318

Source: Research data, 2025

The results of the structural model evaluation demonstrate that the proposed model is both statistically sound and theoretically meaningful. Several key relationships are supported by strong empirical evidence, particularly the role of identity as a central mediator. Moreover, the model exhibits adequate explanatory and predictive power for understanding the formation of freelance entrepreneurial intention among university graduates.

Discussion

The results of this study offer important insights into the psychological and social mechanisms that shape university graduates' intention to pursue freelance-based entrepreneurship in the gig economy. Notably, the findings highlight the pivotal role of entrepreneurial identity as both an outcome and a mediating construct, linking various antecedents to entrepreneurial intention. One of the most significant findings is the strong effect of subjective norms on entrepreneurial identity. This result suggests that graduates' identification with the entrepreneurial role is highly sensitive to perceived social support. In emerging or collectivist societies—where social validation plays a substantial role in career decisions—this outcome supports prior claims that identity construction is often socially negotiated rather than purely intrinsic (Bhardwaj & Sergeeva, 2022). Interestingly, however, subjective norms did not directly affect entrepreneurial intention significantly, implying that their influence is largely indirect, channeled through identity formation. This reinforces the relevance of identity-theoretic extensions to the traditional Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), offering a more nuanced explanation of how social influences operate within the freelance career path.

The significant effects of attitude toward freelancing on identity and intention confirm the continued relevance of TPB while simultaneously expanding its scope. Graduates who view freelancing as meaningful, flexible, and aligned with personal values are likelier to see themselves as entrepreneurs and commit to pursuing freelance work. This confirms that positive attitudinal beliefs are both motivational and identity-forming, especially in career contexts characterized by autonomy and informality. These findings align with prior research emphasizing that freelancing is increasingly seen as a form of "purpose-driven entrepreneurship" among younger generations (Coetzee, 2023; Gussek & Wiesche, 2024). Perceived behavioral control emerged as a dual-path predictor, positively influencing identity and intention. This suggests that when graduates believe they have the skills, time management, and psychological resilience to succeed in freelance work, they are more likely to internalize entrepreneurial values and act on them. This supports prior findings that PBC plays a key motivational and self-definitional role, especially in non-traditional, self-directed careers (Rotimi et al., 2022).

In contrast, self-efficacy did not significantly influence entrepreneurial identity and only marginally affected intention. While unexpected, this result may suggest that, unlike formal entrepreneurship, freelancing requires broader social validation and reputational capital, which mere confidence in one's task-related skills does not fully capture. It also opens a line of inquiry into the differential roles of self-efficacy versus perceived control in identity-driven models of career behavior. Finally, entrepreneurial identity significantly influenced freelance entrepreneurial intention, affirming its mediating role in the proposed framework. This reinforces recent calls in the literature to treat identity as a core psychological mechanism rather than a secondary outcome (Ahmed & Lucianetti, 2024; Wu et al., 2022). By integrating identity as a central node within the model, this study provides a complete account of how graduates transition from perception and evaluation to concrete intention in freelance-based entrepreneurship. These findings have several practical implications. First, universities and career centers should shift their focus from merely providing entrepreneurial skills to actively fostering entrepreneurial identity formation. This can be achieved through mentorship programs, community-building activities, and reflective exercises encourage students to see themselves as autonomous economic agents. Second, policy-makers and platform providers should recognize the social embeddedness of freelance work and design ecosystems that validate freelancing as a legitimate career path—through certification systems, community forums, and visibility-enhancing tools. Finally, freelance platforms should provide work

opportunities and enable identity development by allowing freelancers to showcase their values, narratives, and reputational history.

E. CONCLUSIONS

This study advances the understanding of freelance entrepreneurial intention by integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior with entrepreneurial identity. The findings confirm that intention to pursue freelancing among university graduates is not solely shaped by attitudes or perceived control but is strongly mediated by the internalization of an entrepreneurial identity. Subjective norms emerge as the most influential driver of this identity, emphasizing the importance of social validation in career decision-making. Attitude and perceived behavioral control also contribute significantly, reinforcing the relevance of both psychological and contextual readiness in shaping entrepreneurial pathways. In contrast, self-efficacy plays a more limited role, indicating that confidence alone may not be sufficient without identity alignment or social reinforcement.

While the model demonstrates strong explanatory and predictive power, this study has limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation, and the sample is limited to a specific cultural and educational context. Future studies should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to better understand the dynamics of identity formation over time and across societies. Exploring the moderating roles of digital platform exposure, peer influence, and emotional drivers such as fear of failure or intrinsic motivation could further enrich this framework. The results suggest that fostering freelance intention requires more than skill-building. It demands a shift in how young people see themselves—and are seen by others—as legitimate entrepreneurial actors. Interventions that cultivate entrepreneurial identity and affirm freelancing as a credible career path may prove more effective than those focused on competencies alone.

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