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INTERACTIVE PAPER

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Principal Topic

Using insights derived from Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), researchers have shown that the two main factors affecting entrepreneurial intentions are perceived desirability and perceived feasibility (Krueger et al., 2000). The impact of a third factor – social environment – has received mixed evidence (Kolvereid and Isakson, 2006). To address this, we expand the social environment component using insights from social capital theory. More specifically, we distinguish between strong and weak ties in the social environment and argue that their effect on entrepreneurial intentions is mainly indirect (Miniard and Cohen, 1981). Building further on social capital theory, we note important distinctions in operational measures of the impact of the social environment. On the one hand, we follow the guidelines set out by Ajzen (2006) and measure the cognitive “perceived pressure” social capital of both strong and weak social ties. On the other hand, we follow the structural “available networks” social capital from both bonding and bridging ties. We hypothesize that whereas cognitive social capital will be more important to demonstrate the link to personal desirability, structural social capital demonstrates the link to perceived feasibility (Uphoff, 2000).

Method

To investigate these relationships, we conduct a large scale survey research on a sample of 423 students. We measure the central TPB-constructs with multi-item measures based on the work of previous authors: intentions (Van Gelderen et al., 2008), personal desirability (Krueger et. al, 2000), social norms (Kolvereid and Isakson, 2006) and perceived feasibility (Kraft et al., 2005). We employ advanced structural equation modeling techniques to analyze the data (Ploywarth and Oswald, 2004).

Results/Implications

Our analyses confirm the indirect impact of both strong and weak ties on entrepreneurial intentions via personal desirability and perceived feasibility. Our results also indicate that these effects are contingent on the operational definition of social capital; whereas beliefs of social acceptance are important for strong ties, the actual presence of structural relationships is important for weak ties. These results clarify the effects of different operational definitions in studying the effects of strong and weak ties. Furthermore, these results add to the growing knowledge base with respect to entrepreneurial intentions.