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PERCEIVED BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTION AMONG UNEMPLOYED YOUTH IN THE EASTERN CAPE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SUBJECTIVE NORMS**Obrain Tinashe Murire^{1*}, Sandra Makwembere², Xabiso Ngabase³, Thobeka Ncanywa⁴**^{1*,2,3,4} Walter Sisulu University, South AfricaE-mail: ^{1*} omurire@wsu.ac.za (Corresponding author)

Received 12 May 2026; accepted 5 August 2026; published 30 September 2026

Abstract. This study examines the mediating role of subjective norms in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, an area marked by persistent unemployment and socioeconomic constraints. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study employed a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey and purposive sampling to collect data from 248 participants. Structural equation modelling was applied to test the proposed relationships among constructs. The findings indicate that perceived behavioural control has a positive, statistically significant direct effect on subjective norms ($\beta = 0.748$; $p = 0.001$). Subjective norms, in turn, positively and significantly influence entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.449$; $p = 0.002$). Additionally, perceived behavioural control has a significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.546$; $p = 0.002$). Mediation analysis further demonstrates that subjective norms partially mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention, reflecting a complementary indirect effect ($\beta = 0.374$; $SE = 0.116$; 95% CI [0.182, 0.640]; $p = 0.001$). These results highlight the combined importance of individual control beliefs and social influence in shaping entrepreneurial intention. The study offers practical implications for educators, policymakers, and community programmes by emphasising interventions that strengthen youth agency (skills, self-efficacy, access to resources) and cultivate supportive social norms that legitimise entrepreneurship as a viable pathway to livelihoods and inclusive development.

Keywords: unemployed youth; Eastern Cape; Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB); entrepreneurship; youth empowerment

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Murire, O.T., Makwembere, S., Ngabase, X., Ncanywa, T. 2026. Perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in the Eastern Cape: the mediating role of subjective norms. *Insights into Regional Development*, 8(3), 26-41. <http://doi.org/10.70132/q6465396428>

JEL Classifications: L26

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognised as a key mechanism for addressing socioeconomic challenges in developing contexts, particularly where formal labour markets cannot absorb growing youth populations (Neneh, 2024). In South Africa, the Eastern Cape remains one of the provinces most affected by unemployment, poverty, and economic exclusion, leaving many young people with limited prospects for stable wage employment (Stats SA, 2024; Stats SA, 2025). Recent studies continue to demonstrate that entrepreneurial intention among youth is shaped by entrepreneurial education, access to finance, innovation ecosystems, and psychological capital, particularly within developing economies (Shahriar et al., 2024; Haddoud et al., 2024; Popoola, 2025).

Structural constraints such as limited access to quality education, weak industrial diversification, and inadequate infrastructure continue to restrict broad-based job creation, while sectoral contractions and uneven development further reduce entry-level opportunities for young work seekers (Eastern Cape Socioeconomic Consultative

Council, 2024). As these constraints persist, entrepreneurship is increasingly framed not only as an economic strategy but also as a pathway toward social resilience and inclusive development in resource-constrained communities (GEM, 2024; Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023).

However, entrepreneurship does not begin with business registration; it begins with intention. Entrepreneurial intention refers to an individual's commitment and willingness to start a business and is frequently treated as an immediate antecedent of entrepreneurial behaviour; nonetheless, the "intention-behaviour gap" remains a key concern, especially in contexts where structural barriers prevent intentions from translating into action (Neneh, 2024). In high-unemployment contexts, young people may express interest in self-employment. Yet, their movement from aspiration to action is shaped by psychological readiness, perceived feasibility, and the social environments in which they are embedded (Zwane, 2024). Even when entrepreneurial opportunities exist, many prospective entrepreneurs face barriers such as limited access to finance, insufficient mentorship, weak market linkages, and minimal exposure to constraints on entrepreneurial learning, as repeatedly documented in South African youth entrepreneurship studies (Mhlongo et al., 2025; Zwane, 2024). These realities make it essential to understand the drivers of intention formation among unemployed youth in provinces such as the Eastern Cape. Recent studies on entrepreneurship intention in South Africa and other African contexts further suggest that entrepreneurial intention among youth is significantly influenced by entrepreneurial education, self-efficacy, social support structures, and exposure to entrepreneurship programmes (Mhlongo et al., 2025; Gathitu & Muir, 2026).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) remains one of the most influential frameworks for explaining the formation of intentions, including entrepreneurial intention. TPB proposes that intention is shaped by (1) attitudes toward the behaviour, (2) subjective norms, and (3) perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). While many entrepreneurship studies apply TPB in full, there is growing value in testing focused pathways to understand better mechanisms most relevant in specific populations and environments, particularly where culture and social context shape the strength of TPB relationships (Mfazi & Elliott, 2022). In socially embedded contexts where family networks, community expectations, and collective livelihood strategies are pronounced, subjective norms may play a stronger role than is sometimes observed in more individualistic settings (Pham et al., 2023). In parallel, in settings marked by poverty and constrained opportunity, perceived behavioural control can be decisive: young people who believe they have the capability and resources (or can access them) may be more likely to develop stronger entrepreneurial intention (Villanueva-Flores et al., 2023).

Recent South African entrepreneurship intention studies grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour continue to demonstrate the importance of personal attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in shaping entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth (Murire et al., 2026). However, while prior studies have largely focused on the direct effects of TPB constructs, limited attention has been given to the mediating mechanisms through which subjective norms strengthen the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention in resource-constrained township settings.

Against this background, the present study focuses on a specific pathway within the TPB logic, how perceived behavioural control (PBC) shapes entrepreneurial intention (EI) directly and indirectly through subjective norms (SN). This emphasis is particularly relevant in the Eastern Cape, where social approval and community validation can influence whether entrepreneurship is seen as legitimate, realistic, and worth pursuing (Stats SA, 2025). Prior evidence suggests that in community-oriented environments, social influences can reinforce or constrain individual motivation, meaning intention is not only an individual psychological state but also a socially negotiated outcome (Mfazi & Elliott, 2022; Pham et al., 2023).

Therefore, the study examines whether subjective norms mediate the relationship between personal agency (PBC) and entrepreneurial intentions. In other words, beyond believing "I can do this," do young people also need to perceive "people important to me approve and support this" for entrepreneurial intention to strengthen?

Empirically, Study 3 uses a quantitative cross-sectional survey with purposive sampling of 248 unemployed youth participants and applies structural equation modelling with bootstrapping to test the hypothesised relationships.

The results provide evidence that PBC significantly predicts SN and EI, SN significantly predicts EI, and SN partially mediates the PBC–EI relationship through a complementary indirect pathway. The contribution of this study is threefold. First, unlike many previous entrepreneurship intention studies that primarily focus on university students, this study focuses specifically on unemployed youth in a resource-constrained township context in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Second, the study extends entrepreneurship intention literature by examining the mediating role of subjective norms in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention. Third, the findings demonstrate that entrepreneurial intention formation among unemployed youth is not only agency-driven but also socially negotiated through community support, social validation, and normative approval processes. This contribution complements recent studies on entrepreneurial intention in developing economies (Shahriar et al., 2024; Haddoud et al., 2024; Popoola, 2025).

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

Theoretical framework

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) explains how individuals form intentions that precede planned behaviours (Ajzen, 1991). The theory argues that intention is influenced by three determinants: *attitude toward the behaviour*, *subjective norms*, and *perceived behavioural control*. Attitude reflects the individual's evaluation of entrepreneurship (favourable or unfavourable), subjective norms reflect perceived social pressure or approval, and perceived behavioural control reflects perceived capability and access to resources required to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In entrepreneurship research, TPB is widely adopted because business creation is typically intentional and involves planning, effort and commitment over time (Krueger et al., 2000; Liñán & Chen, 2009).

A core strength of TPB is its ability to incorporate both *internal* and *external* drivers of intention. While attitudes and control beliefs are often treated as personal psychological factors, subjective norms capture how social environments shape decision-making through perceived expectations from important referent groups, such as family, peers, and community leaders (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Cialdini et al., 1990). This makes TPB particularly useful for analysing entrepreneurial intention in community-based environments where collective expectations may strongly influence what individuals perceive as acceptable and feasible (Triandis, 1995).

In this study, TPB is applied to examine (1) whether perceived behavioural control influences entrepreneurial intention directly, (2) whether subjective norms influence entrepreneurial intention, and (3) whether subjective norms mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention. This mediation logic aligns with the view that individual agency (control beliefs) and perceived social approval can jointly shape entrepreneurial intention, particularly among unemployed youth operating within tight social networks and resource constraints (Schlaegel & Koenig, 2014; Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

Recent studies on entrepreneurial intention have increasingly focused on entrepreneurial education, access to finance, psychological capital, and innovation ecosystems as predictors of entrepreneurial intention among university students and youth populations in developing countries (Shahriar et al., 2024; Haddoud et al., 2024; Popoola, 2025). However, few studies have examined how subjective norms mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed township youth operating in socioeconomically constrained environments. This study, therefore, contributes to the Theory of Planned Behaviour literature by empirically demonstrating that entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth is simultaneously influenced by perceived capability and socially reinforced approval structures.

Perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention

Perceived behavioural control refers to an individual's perception of their ability to control the performance of a behaviour, including the perceived availability of skills, resources, and opportunities to act (Ajzen, 1991). In entrepreneurship, PBC is conceptually close to entrepreneurial self-efficacy because both reflect confidence in one's capability to execute entrepreneurial tasks and manage uncertainty (Zhao et al., 2005). Where youth face structural barriers such as limited financial access, weak market linkages, and scarce mentorship, perceived control becomes a critical factor in seeing entrepreneurship as feasible rather than merely desirable (Szirmai et al., 2011; World Bank, 2020).

Empirical scholarship consistently supports PBC as a strong predictor of entrepreneurial intention across diverse contexts (Krueger et al., 2000; Schlaegel & Koenig, 2014). Individuals who believe they can mobilise resources, cope with business risk, and handle start-up demands are more likely to develop stronger entrepreneurial intentions (Liñán & Chen, 2009; Kautonen et al., 2015). For unemployed youth, this relationship is particularly important: intention is less likely to be driven by “interest” alone and more likely to depend on perceived feasibility under constrained conditions (ILO, 2020). In this study, perceived behavioural control had a statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention, indicating that greater control beliefs are associated with stronger intentions to pursue entrepreneurship. This supports the TPB position that perceived behavioural control functions as an intention driver, especially for behaviours that require substantial planning and resource mobilisation (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001).

Subjective norms and their mediating role

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social expectations, approval, or pressure from significant others regarding whether an individual should engage in a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In entrepreneurship, subjective norms reflect whether family members, peers, mentors and community leaders are supportive of business start-up decisions, and whether the individual values those opinions (Liñán & Chen, 2009). Norms can encourage entrepreneurial intention by legitimising entrepreneurship as a socially acceptable and desirable pathway, particularly when social networks provide emotional support, advice, and access to resources (Cialdini et al., 1990; Kautonen et al., 2015).

While some studies have found subjective norms to be weaker than attitudes or PBC in predicting entrepreneurial intention, this often varies by context and population. In collectivist or community-oriented settings, normative pressures may be stronger because individuals rely more on family and peer networks for support and validation (Triandis, 1995). In such environments, subjective norms can operate not only as direct predictors but also as mechanisms through which personal beliefs translate into stronger intentions (Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

From a mediation perspective, a key argument is that individuals with higher perceived behavioural control may be more likely to seek encouragement, communicate their plans confidently, and interpret feedback as supportive, thereby strengthening perceived subjective norms, which, in turn, elevate entrepreneurial intention (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Mediation analysis in behavioural research is commonly assessed using bootstrapping because it provides more robust confidence intervals for indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In addition, “complementary partial mediation” occurs when both the direct and indirect effects are significant and point in the same direction (Zhao et al., 2010).

The study provides evidence for this mechanism: subjective norms significantly predicted entrepreneurial intention and significantly mediated the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention via a positive indirect effect, consistent with complementary partial mediation.

Contextualising subjective norms

Subjective norms must be interpreted within a socio-cultural context. In communities where unemployment is widespread and households depend on shared survival strategies, social approval and family influence can

meaningfully shape entrepreneurial decision-making (Triandis, 1995; Williams & Williams, 2014). For unemployed youth, entrepreneurship can be seen either as a respected pathway to independence or as an uncertain option compared to secure employment, meaning that encouragement (or discouragement) from key referent groups can materially affect intention formation (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

In settings like the Eastern Cape, subjective norms may be particularly salient because social networks often function as primary sources of emotional support and informal resources. Where formal institutions are limited, family members and peers can influence not only confidence but also access to information, start-up resources and market opportunities (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, understanding whether subjective norms strengthen the effect of control beliefs is important for designing interventions that are socially grounded rather than individually focused (Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

The study's descriptive results also suggest strong relationships among the three constructs (PBC, SN and EI), which supports the view that intention formation among unemployed youth is embedded in both perceived agency and perceived social approval processes.

Hypotheses

H1: Perceived behavioural control has a statistically significant positive and direct effect on subjective norm.

H2: Subjective norm has a statistically significant positive and direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.

H3: Perceived behavioural control has a statistically significant positive and direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.

H4: Subjective norm has a significant mediating effect on the relationship between perceived behavioural control and subjective norm.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to examine the relationships among perceived behavioural control (PBC), subjective norms (SN), and entrepreneurial intention (EI) among unemployed youth in a South African township. A cross-sectional survey design was utilised to collect data at a single point in time.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit participants who met the study's specific inclusion criteria, unemployed youth (18–35 years) with potential interest in entrepreneurship. This approach was appropriate because the target population was clearly defined and required deliberate selection. Data were collected from 248 participants using a self-administered questionnaire. The sample size was considered adequate for structural equation modelling (SEM), meeting recommended minimum thresholds (Wolf et al., 2013).

To enhance instrument quality, the questionnaire was reviewed for face validity by three local entrepreneurship educators and two community development practitioners, and minor revisions were made based on their feedback. A pilot study (n = 20) involving unemployed youth with similar characteristics was conducted to assess comprehension, wording clarity, and cultural appropriateness, which led to further small refinements.

The instrument was adapted from the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire (EIQ) developed by Liñán and Chen (2009). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The constructs were operationalised using established measures: subjective norms were captured using three items reflecting perceived social approval/pressure to start a business; perceived behavioural control was measured using six items assessing perceived ease/difficulty and capability to start a business; and entrepreneurial intention was assessed using six items designed to measure an individual's intention to start an enterprise (Liñán & Chen, 2009).

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participant demographics and the main study variables. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted in AMOS 22 to assess the measurement model's validity and reliability. Thereafter, SEM was used to test the hypothesised structural relationships among PBC, SN, and EI. A bootstrapped maximum likelihood estimation procedure was applied, and the significance of direct and indirect effects was evaluated using bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, and Jöreskog's rho coefficients.

4. Results and Interpretation of Obtained Results

Demographic information

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the main study variables (personal attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, and entrepreneurial intention). Table 1 presents the demographics of the study sample.

Table 1. Respondent demographic information

Variable	Levels	df	f	Valid %
Gender	Male	1	101	40.7
	Female		147	58.9
Age	18-21	2	63	25.4
	22-25		49	19.8
	26-29		43	17.3
	30-33		53	21.4
	34-35		39	15.7
Highest Qualification	Grade 11	3	102	41.1
	National Senior Certificate/ Matric		119	48.0
	National Certificate Vocational		9	3.6
	Diploma		14	5.6
	Degree		3	1.2
Marital Status	Single	4	239	96.4
	Married		9	3.6
Dependents	None	5	114	46.0
	1-2		100	40.3
	3-4		23	9.3
	5-more		11	4.43
Impairment/ Disability	No	6	240	96.77
	Yes		8	3.22

N= 248

The demographic profile shows that 58.9% of respondents were female and 40.7% were male, suggesting gender-related differences in entrepreneurial intention. In many developing contexts, women often engage more actively in entrepreneurship due to structural constraints such as limited access to formal employment. For this group, entrepreneurship often serves as a practical route to financial independence and autonomy (Neneh, 2020; Giwu et al., 2024).

Almost half of the participants were aged 18–25, indicating a youth-dominated sample. This age cohort is often more willing to explore entrepreneurial opportunities and take risks, partly because they typically have fewer long-term personal obligations and may be more adaptable. These characteristics can contribute to stronger entrepreneurial intentions.

Most respondents reported secondary-level education, with 48.0% holding a National Senior Certificate and 41.1% having Grade 11. This reflects constrained access to tertiary education. In such circumstances, entrepreneurship can emerge as a more realistic and accessible pathway for income generation and self-employment (Makhetha, 2020).

In terms of socioeconomic characteristics, the majority of respondents (96.4%) were single, which may allow greater flexibility and lower risk aversion when considering entrepreneurial ventures (Libera, 2024). However, 54% reported having dependents. This suggests a complex dynamic: some unemployed youth may be driven toward entrepreneurship to meet household needs, while others may become more cautious due to financial responsibilities and the risk of unstable income (Kautonen et al., 2015; Petersen, 2021).

Only 3.22% of participants reported having a disability or impairment. While this means the findings largely reflect the perceptions of able-bodied youth, it remains important to acknowledge that youth with disabilities often face distinct barriers to entrepreneurship in township settings. These may include accessibility limitations, social stigma, and restricted support networks, which can constrain entrepreneurial participation (Giwu et al., 2024).

Validity and reliability assessment

The measurement tool was first subjected to validity and reliability assessment. The validity of the tools was examined using CFA to establish the measurement model. Reliability analysis was conducted to examine the reliability of the established factors. Since the measurement tool was adopted from other authors, literature on the instrument was used to guide the empirical factors to be loaded in the CFA. To examine the model fitness, we utilised some goodness-of-fit indices coupled with their respective criteria (see Table 2).

Table 2. Goodness of fit indices summary and their accepted values according to literature

Name of index	Cut-off points	Comment	Reference
CMIN/DF	< 3	Good fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	< 5	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
RMSEA	≤ 0.05	Good fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	$0.05 < \text{RMSEA} \leq 0.10$	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
SRMR	≤ 0.05	Good fit	Diamantopoulos & Siguaw (2000)
	$0.05 < \text{SRMR} \leq 0.09$	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
CFI	1	Perfect fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	≥ 0.95	Good fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	$0.90 \leq \text{CFI} < 0.95$	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
NFI	1	Perfect fit	Daire Hooper, et al. (2008)
	≥ 0.95	Good fit	Daire Hooper, et al. (2008)
	$0.90 \leq \text{NFI} < 0.95$	Acceptable fit	Daire Hooper, et al. (2008)

CMIN/DF = Chi-square divided by degree of freedom. **SRMR** = The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. **RMSEA** = The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation. **CFI** = The Comparative Fit Index. **NFI** = The Normed Fit Index.

In general, the results for the validity and reliability assessment of the measurement instrument, estimated from the CFA and reliability coefficients, are highly satisfactory. The most parsimonious model was achieved after eliminating items with poor factor loadings. Results from Table 3 show that all factor loadings were above 0.60, indicating satisfactory significance of the retained items. The average variance extracted (AVE) values are all greater than the required minimum of 0.50. Thus, the convergent validity is deemed adequate for the established factors. Regarding reliability, all the factors exhibited Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega values greater than 0.80. Thus, the internal consistency of the factors is highly satisfactory. Further, assessing the Jöreskog rho, the values are more than 0.80 for all the major variables; thus, composite reliability is also highly satisfactory for the established measurement model. The resulting measurement model (see Figure 1) shows high factor loadings, indicating a satisfactory fit between the items and factors. Examining the overall assessment criteria for model fitness, the measurement model showed generally an acceptable fit.

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis and reliability output for the measurement model

Variables	Items Before CFA	Items After CFA	CFA Loadings Range	AVE	CR	Alpha	ω
Perceived behavioural control	6	4	[0.659 – 0.823]	0.565	0.838	0.835	0.840
Subjective norm	3	3	[0.803 – 0.821]	0.658	0.852	0.853	0.855
Entrepreneurial intention	6	4	[0.767 – 0.859]	0.685	0.897	0.897	0.899

CFA = Confirmatory factor analysis. **AVE** = The average variance extracted. **CR** = Composite reliability as measured by the Jöreskog rho coefficient. **Alpha** = The Cronbach's alpha coefficients. **ω** = McDonalds' omega coefficient.

The results in Table 4 showed that the value of CMIN/DF = 3.916 is between three (3) and five (5), suggesting an acceptable model fit. Further, SRMR = 0.040 is below 0.05, which suggests a good model fit. The RMSEA is 0.104 with 90% CI [0.097, 0.127], indicating an acceptable model fit. For incremental fitness, CFI is 0.933 > 0.90, and TLI is 0.909, which is also greater than > 0.90, both suggesting an acceptable model fit.

Table 4. Goodness-of-fit indices for the established measurement model

Measurement model	CMIN/DF	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA [90% CI]
Measurement Model	3.916	0.933	0.909	0.040	0.104 [0.097 – 0.127]

CMIN/DF = Discrepancy/Chi-square divided by degree of freedom. **CFI** = The Comparative Fit Index. **TLI** = The Tucker-Lewis index. **SRMR** = The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. **RMSEA** = The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.

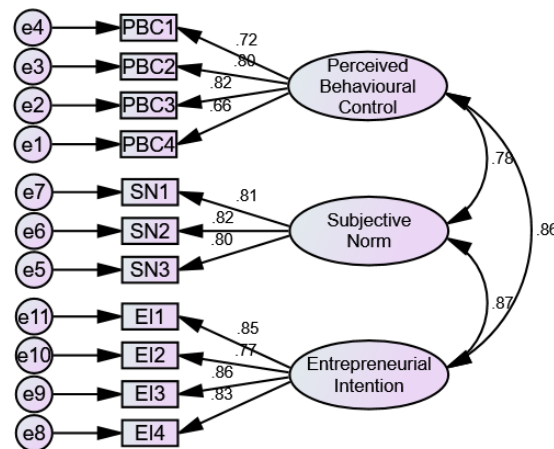


Figure 1. Measurement model

Descriptive summary of main theoretical variables

Table 5 presents the descriptive summary and correlations of the main theoretical variables. The results show moderate mean levels (on a 5-point Likert scale) for the study's major theoretical variables. The results of assessing the linear relationship between perceived behavioural control and subjective norm indicate that perceived behavioural control is strongly, positively, and statistically significantly associated with subjective norm ($r = 0.673$). Thus, as perceived behavioural control increases, the subjective norm also increases. For the linear relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention, the results show that perceived behavioural control has a strong and positive significant linear relationship with entrepreneurial intention ($r = 0.753$). Thus, as perceived behavioural control increases, entrepreneurial intention also increases. It is also important to note that entrepreneurial intention has a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation with subjective norm ($r = 0.755$).

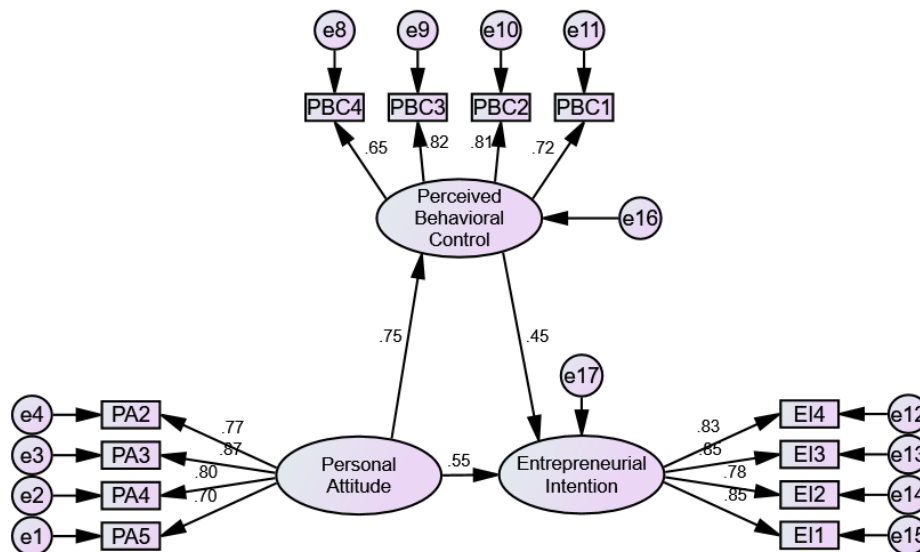
Table 5. Descriptive summary of main theoretical variables

Variables	Mean (SD)	PBC	SN	EI
Perceived behavioural control	4.016 (0.856)	1		
Subjective norm	4.097 (0.999)	0.673**	1	
Entrepreneurial intention	4.339 (0.871)	0.753**	0.755**	1

PBC = Perceived Behavioural Control; **SN** = Subjective Norm; **EI** = Entrepreneurial Intention; **SD** = Standard Deviation

Hypotheses testing

Figure 2 shows the structural model established to test the hypothesised frameworks presented earlier. The goodness of fit indices of the established structural model indicate that the model has a satisfactory fit for the data. The structural regression path coefficients were used to test for the direct effects between the variables, whilst the mediation effect was assessed using the significance of the indirect effect by utilising the maximum likelihood-based bootstrap procedure.



CMIN/DF = 2.974; CFI = 0.948; TLI = 0.933; SRMR = 0.042; RMSEA = 0.090 with 90% CI [0.074; 0.107].

Figure 2. Structural model

Hypotheses H1: Table 6 shows the maximum likelihood-based beta estimates with their respective bootstrapped 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the regression path coefficients. The results show that the path for the direct effect of perceived behavioural control on subjective norm is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.748$; $SE = 0.074$; 95% CI = [0.576, 0.865]; $p = 0.001$). Since the beta parameter is positive and statistically

significant, the result supports *H1*; perceived behavioural control has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on subjective norm.

Hypotheses H2: Examining the direct effect of subjective norm on entrepreneurial intention, the regression path coefficient shows a positive and statistically significant estimate ($\beta = 0.449$; $SE = 0.131$; 95% CI = [0.200, 0.711]; $p = 0.002$). This finding supports *H2*, that is, subjective norm has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.

Hypotheses H3: The regression path coefficient for the direct effect of perceived behavioural control on entrepreneurial intention is also positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.546$; $SE = 0.127$; 95% CI = [0.296, 0.794]; $p = 0.002$). This result supports *H3*, hence we can conclude that perceived behavioural control has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.

Hypothesis H4: Lastly, it was imperative to establish whether subjective norm significantly mediates the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention. The indirect effect was examined, and the results indicated a positive and statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.374$; $SE = 0.116$; 95% CI [0.182, 0.640]; $p = 0.001$). This is a case of complementary partial mediation since the direct effect of perceived behavioural control on entrepreneurial intention is positive and statistically significant, whilst the indirect effect is also positive and statistically significant. From these findings, there is sufficient statistical evidence to support *H4* and conclude that subjective norm significantly partially mediates the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention.

Table 6. Structural model path beta estimates to establish the mediating effect of subjective norm on the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention

Effects	Beta estimates		95% CI	Bias-Corrected	Significance of beta estimates
	Beta	SE	LLCI	ULCI	p-value
Direct effect(s)					
Path a: PBC (X) $\rightarrow$ SN (M)	0.748	0.074	0.576	0.865	0.001*
Path b: SN (M) $\rightarrow$ EI (Y)	0.449	0.131	0.200	0.711	0.002*
Path c: PBC (X) $\rightarrow$ EI (Y)	0.546	0.127	0.296	0.794	0.002*
Total effect of X on Y	0.982	0.111	0.746	1.182	0.001*
Indirect effect of X on Y	0.374	0.116	0.182	0.640	0.001*

*Significant effect at Alpha = 0.05. Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 10000

Note: SE – Standard Error, LLCI - Lower limit confidence interval and ULCI - Upper limit confidence interval.

Independent variable (X): Perceived behavioural control (PBC)

Dependent variable (Y): Entrepreneurial intention (EI)

Mediator variable (M): Subjective norm (SN)

Interpretation of findings

The findings provide important insights into the relationships between perceived behavioural control (PBC), subjective norms (SN), and entrepreneurial intention (EI), grounded in a partial application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Overall, the results support the hypothesised direct relationships and confirm the mediating role of subjective norms in explaining how perceived capability and control translate into stronger entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on entrepreneurship intention by highlighting the combined influence of personal agency and social validation in resource-constrained contexts.

Firstly, the results reveal that perceived behavioural control has a strong, positive, and statistically significant direct effect on subjective norms ($\beta = 0.748$; $p = 0.001$). This suggests that unemployed youth who perceive

themselves as capable of starting and managing a business are also more likely to perceive encouragement and approval from significant others. These findings are consistent with the theoretical assumptions of the TPB, which propose that perceptions of capability influence behavioural intentions through both individual and social mechanisms (Ajzen, 1991). The findings also support those reported by Villanueva-Flores et al. (2023), who found that perceived behavioural control can indirectly influence entrepreneurial intention through socially embedded pathways. Similarly, Murire et al. (2026) reported that higher levels of perceived behavioural control significantly strengthen entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in South Africa. The present study extends this body of knowledge by demonstrating that perceived behavioural control not only directly influences entrepreneurial intention but also enhances perceptions of social approval, thereby strengthening subjective norms.

Secondly, subjective norms were found to positively and significantly predict entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.449$; $p = 0.002$). This finding supports the view that entrepreneurial intention is not solely an individual psychological state but is also shaped by social expectations, family support, peer influence, and community validation. These findings are consistent with those of Pham et al. (2023), who found that subjective norms play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial intention through complex social influence processes. Likewise, Mhlongo et al. (2025) reported that entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurship education contribute significantly to entrepreneurial intention among South African youth, partly through creating supportive social environments. Similar findings were reported by Haddoud et al. (2024), who highlighted the role of psychological capital and entrepreneurship education in strengthening entrepreneurial implementation intentions. The current study extends these findings by demonstrating that subjective norms function not only as direct predictors of entrepreneurial intention but also as mediating mechanisms through which perceived behavioural control influences entrepreneurial intention.

Thirdly, the results indicate that perceived behavioural control has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.546$; $p = 0.002$). This finding reinforces one of the central propositions of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, namely that individuals are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities when they believe they possess the skills, resources, and capabilities necessary to succeed (Ajzen, 1991). These findings are consistent with those reported by Kautonen et al. (2015), who found that perceived behavioural control was among the strongest predictors of entrepreneurial intentions across contexts. Similarly, Gathitu and Muiru (2026) found that self-efficacy significantly influences entrepreneurial intention among university students in Kenya, while Murire et al. (2026) reported a positive relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in South Africa. The present findings therefore provide further empirical support for the importance of perceived capability in fostering entrepreneurial aspirations, particularly in environments characterised by unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and resource constraints.

Finally, the mediation analysis demonstrates that subjective norms partially mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention through a statistically significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.374$; $SE = 0.116$; 95% CI [0.182, 0.640]; $p = 0.001$). Since both the direct effect (PBC $\rightarrow$ EI) and indirect effect (PBC $\rightarrow$ SN $\rightarrow$ EI) were positive and significant, the mediation pattern reflects complementary partial mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). These findings are consistent with those of Villanueva-Flores et al. (2023), who similarly found that subjective norms and perceived behavioural control interact to influence entrepreneurial intention. However, the current study contributes additional insight by demonstrating this mediating mechanism among unemployed youth in a township setting within the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Unlike many previous studies that focused primarily on university students, the present research highlights how social approval and community support reinforce entrepreneurial intentions among economically marginalised youth populations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that entrepreneurship development initiatives should not focus exclusively on enhancing individual capabilities such as entrepreneurial skills, self-efficacy, and access to resources. Rather,

interventions should simultaneously cultivate supportive social ecosystems that legitimise entrepreneurship as a viable career pathway. Family-inclusive entrepreneurship programmes, community mentorship initiatives, peer-support networks, and exposure to successful entrepreneurial role models may strengthen both perceived behavioural control and subjective norms. The findings therefore support recent calls for entrepreneurship interventions that recognise entrepreneurial intention as both an agency-driven and socially negotiated process within resource-constrained environments (Shahriar et al., 2024; Mhlono et al., 2026; Popoola, 2025).

Theoretical implications

Theoretically, Study 3 strengthens entrepreneurship-intention scholarship by showing that PBC may operate through both an “agency pathway” (direct PBC→EI) and a “social validation pathway” (PBC→SN→EI) in a youth unemployment setting. This finding aligns with recent work arguing that subjective norms remain under-specified in many TPB applications and require deeper contextual interpretation, particularly regarding how social approval processes interact with other TPB predictors (Ahmed, 2025).

The results also complement more recent syntheses suggesting that TPB remains robust across entrepreneurship contexts, while the relative importance of TPB constructs (especially SN) varies by setting, population, and socio-cultural embeddedness (Mfazi & Elliott, 2022; Andrade & Carvalho, 2023). In the Eastern Cape context, where youth often rely on social networks for emotional and material support, the significant SN pathway provides empirical evidence that the formation of entrepreneurial intention is partly socially negotiated rather than purely individualistic.

The findings also extend recent entrepreneurship intention scholarship emerging from developing economies. Shahriar et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of entrepreneurship programmes and access to finance in shaping entrepreneurial intention, while Popoola (2025) demonstrated that innovation environments and entrepreneurship education significantly influence entrepreneurial intention among youth. The present study contributes differently by focusing on unemployed youth within township settings where entrepreneurial intention formation is socially negotiated through collective approval structures, family support systems, and community validation processes.

Practical and policy implications

At a practical level, the findings imply that interventions aimed at increasing youth entrepreneurship should build both (i) individual capability and feasibility (PBC) and (ii) supportive social norms (SN). This is especially important in South Africa's youth labour market, where a large share of unemployed youth report no prior work experience, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and limited pathways to opportunity (Statistics South Africa, 2025). In such circumstances, strengthening PBC through applied skills development, mentorship, and access to resources can directly enhance intention while also improving how young people perceive social approval of entrepreneurship.

For policymakers and local economic development stakeholders, the complementary mediation pattern suggests that entrepreneurship programmes should not focus only on the “individual entrepreneur,” but also intentionally engage the surrounding social system, families, peers, community leaders, and local role models. Community-facing strategies (e.g., showcasing credible local entrepreneurs, family-inclusive entrepreneurship training, peer entrepreneurship clubs, and community mentorship networks) can help convert capability gains into socially reinforced intentions. This aligns with broader international concerns about youth employment prospects and the need for multi-actor support ecosystems (ILO, 2024).

For entrepreneurship educators and training providers, the results support strengthening practical, experience-based entrepreneurship education and mentorship, given continued concerns that entrepreneurship education in many contexts is often assessed as weak and insufficiently practice-oriented (GEM, 2024). In line with Study 3, educational interventions should be designed to increase perceived controllability (e.g., opportunity recognition,

feasibility planning, micro-venture experimentation) while also building social legitimacy (e.g., family/community pitch days, peer support structures, and locally relevant success narratives).

Study limitations

Notwithstanding the analytical value of the findings, the research design necessarily operates within specific constraints. First, the study used a cross-sectional survey design, which limits causal interpretations of the observed relationships (Ajzen, 1991). Second, non-probability purposive sampling was applied to target unemployed youth with entrepreneurial potential, which may constrain the generalisability of the results beyond the immediate population studied (Wolf et al., 2013). Relatedly, the study relied on self-reported measures adapted from prior scales, which can introduce common-method effects and social desirability bias (Liñán & Chen, 2009).

Future research should therefore consider longitudinal designs (e.g., time-lagged measurement of PBC, SN, and EI) to strengthen causal inference and better capture the development of intention over time (Ajzen, 1991). Comparative studies across multiple districts/provinces, and between rural–urban settings, would also be valuable for testing the contextual stability of the PBC→SN→EI pathway in South Africa (Neneh, 2020; Urban, 2020). Finally, mixed-method approaches could deepen interpretation by exploring *why* and *how* social approval processes amplify agency into intention in resource-constrained communities (Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

5. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate how perceived behavioural control and subjective norms interact to influence entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, an environment marked by persistent unemployment and socioeconomic constraints. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study specifically examined whether subjective norms mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention.

The empirical findings confirm that perceived behavioural control exerts a statistically significant positive effect on subjective norms and entrepreneurial intention, and that subjective norms significantly predict entrepreneurial intention. Furthermore, subjective norms partially mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention, indicating a complementary mediation effect.

This pattern highlights that stronger capability beliefs can translate into stronger entrepreneurial intention both directly and through enhanced perceived social support. Overall, the study contributes to entrepreneurship-intention scholarship by showing that perceived behavioural control is not only an internal judgement of feasibility but can also operate through a social mechanism (subjective norms), thereby further strengthening entrepreneurial intention.

The study also contributes to emerging entrepreneurship scholarship in developing economies by highlighting that entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth is shaped not only by perceived capability but also by socially embedded support systems and normative approval processes.

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of the mediating role of subjective norms in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in a resource-constrained South African township. Unlike many previous entrepreneurship intention studies that primarily focused on university students and direct TPB relationships, the present study demonstrates that entrepreneurial intention formation among unemployed youth is both agency-driven and socially negotiated through community validation and social approval structures. The findings, therefore, extend the Theory of Planned Behaviour literature within developing economy contexts.

For educators, policymakers, and community leaders, the results underscore the need for youth entrepreneurship strategies that simultaneously build competence and access to enabling resources, while cultivating supportive social norms that validate entrepreneurship as a viable pathway to livelihoods and inclusive development.

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Authors' Contributions. *Obrain Tinashe Murire*: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, project administration, writing original draft preparation, writing review and editing, and corresponding author responsibilities. *Sandra Makwembere*: Conceptualisation, methodology, validation, writing – review and editing, and supervision of the research process. *Xabiso Ngabase*: Data curation, investigation, validation, and writing – review and editing. *Thobeka Ncanywa*: Academic oversight, validation, writing review and editing. All authors contributed to the development of the manuscript, reviewed the final version, and approved it for publication.

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