

E-Entrepreneurial Intentions: Parasocial Relationships with Influencers

Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how parasocial relationships with influencers shape e-entrepreneurial intentions among Millennials and Generation Z. In addition, the study investigates the mediating roles of theory of planned behavior constructs, including attitudes toward e-entrepreneurship, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms.

Methodology – Data were collected from 381 social media users across both generations and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling.

Findings – Results indicate that attitudes toward e-entrepreneurship and perceived behavioral control fully mediate the relationship between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions. These findings highlight parasocial relationships as a key antecedent that shapes entrepreneurial cognitions, which in turn drive e-entrepreneurial intentions.

Practical implications – Social media influencers can serve as virtual mentors to inspire e-entrepreneurial behavior among youth. Policymakers, incubators, and digital entrepreneurship programs can leverage influencer-follower dynamics to foster e-entrepreneurial intentions among youth, particularly in digitally advanced emerging economies.

Originality– Unlike prior research that primarily examines influencers' effects on consumer behavior, this study shows how parasocial relationships shape e-entrepreneurial intentions. It further highlights the mediating role of the theory of planned behavior constructs in explaining how one-sided relationships with influencers translate into entrepreneurial intentions.

Keywords: E-entrepreneurial intentions, Parasocial relationships with influencers, Theory of planned behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent media commentary highlights how social media influencers are increasingly shaping followers' perceptions of entrepreneurial possibilities and business creation. Influencers are not only launching their own brands and products but also modeling business behaviors that prompt followers to rethink traditional career paths and entrepreneurial opportunities, as discussed in broader creator-economy coverage in *Vogue Business* (Maguire and Schulz, 2025). Against this backdrop, in today's rapidly digitalizing world, the influence of social media on the lives of Millennials and Generation Z has become pervasive, shaping not only lifestyle preferences but also career choices (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Tang and Cui, 2025). Among these digitally immersed cohorts, electronic entrepreneurship (*hereafter referred to as e-entrepreneurship*), defined as establishing and managing businesses through online platforms, has emerged as a promising career pathway (Li and Kang, 2024). Young individuals are increasingly drawn to launching digital ventures as viable alternatives to traditional employment (Chaudhary and Biswas, 2024; Paul *et al.*, 2023). Social media accelerates this shift by enabling influencers to act as role models and mentors who demonstrate entrepreneurial possibilities through their online presence (Qasim *et al.*, 2024). Understanding the cognitive mechanisms through which influencers shape e-entrepreneurial intentions is therefore critical for both theory and practice.

Despite the growing body of work on social media influencers, most research remains confined to their effects on consumer behavior, particularly purchase intentions, brand loyalty, and attitudes (Pradhan *et al.*, 2023; Sardar and Vijay, 2025). These studies highlight the power of parasocial relationships, which are the one-sided bonds that followers form with influencers, to guide consumer preferences (Conde and Casais, 2023). However, little is known about whether such relationships also foster entrepreneurial intentions, especially in the digital domain

(Rudeloff and Damms, 2023; Tang and Cui, 2025). In contrast, entrepreneurship research traditionally emphasizes factors such as personality traits, environmental influences, and education as predictors of entrepreneurial intentions (Aloulou *et al.*, 2024; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023). The role of influencers as external socializing agents has received scant attention (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2024; Mir *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, existing studies on e-entrepreneurship tend to focus on ecosystem-level determinants such as access to resources, technology adoption, and institutional support (Çela *et al.*, 2025), while largely neglecting the psychological mechanisms through which influencer-follower interactions translate into entrepreneurial aspirations (Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024). To address these gaps, this study examines how parasocial relationships with influencers influence e-entrepreneurial intentions among Millennials and Generation Z, via the mediating mechanisms of the theory of planned behavior constructs.

Parasocial relationships with influencers are one-sided, self-constructed bonds that followers form by perceiving influencers as trusted friends or mentors (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Conde and Casais, 2023). Parasocial relationships have been widely examined in marketing for their impact on consumer attitudes (Masuda *et al.*, 2022); however, their implications for entrepreneurial behavior remain underexplored (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Sharma *et al.*, 2026). To theorize these effects, this study builds on the theory of planned behavior, which posits that intentions are shaped by three determinants: attitude toward the behavior, perceived behavioral control, and perceived subjective norms (Conner, 2020). In the entrepreneurial context, attitude toward behavior reflects an individual's evaluation of starting a digital venture, perceived behavioral control represents confidence in entrepreneurial capability, and perceived subjective norms capture the influence of social approval on entrepreneurial choice (Ajzen, 2011; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023).

We argue that influencers serve as accessible entrepreneurial role models, shaping followers' perceptions of digital venture creation. Prior research shows that exposure to relatable models can enhance entrepreneurial self-efficacy and increase the likelihood of entrepreneurial action (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020). Influencers frequently share their professional journeys, demonstrate business acumen, and normalize entrepreneurial risk-taking (Çela *et al.*, 2025; Kay *et al.*, 2020), which can directly inspire e-entrepreneurial intentions among their followers. These effects are also likely mediated by the three key determinants of the theory of planned behavior (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023; Sharma *et al.*, 2026). By portraying entrepreneurship as rewarding, influencers can foster positive attitudes toward entrepreneurial action (Tang and Cui, 2025). Their visible successes may strengthen perceived behavioral control, convincing followers of their own capability to pursue ventures (Aw and Chuah, 2021). Finally, their endorsement of entrepreneurship signals social approval, shaping subjective norms in favor of entrepreneurial choices (Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024). These insights provide both theoretical and practical implications for designing digital mentorship programs and social media campaigns to promote youth entrepreneurship.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it extends influencer marketing research beyond its traditional focus on consumer behavior by examining its implications for e-entrepreneurial intentions (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024; Sharma *et al.*, 2026). Second, it advances entrepreneurial marketing theory by conceptualizing influencers as digital role models who shape entrepreneurial attitudes, confidence, and social validation (Aloulou *et al.*, 2024; Tang and Cui, 2025). Third, it integrates the parasocial relationship perspective with the theory of planned behavior to offer a novel framework explaining how social and psychological processes interact to drive entrepreneurial outcomes (Al Halbusi *et al.*,

2023; Rudeloff and Damms, 2023). Finally, the study provides a practical implication by highlighting how policymakers, incubators, and digital entrepreneurship programs can leverage influencer-follower dynamics to foster e-entrepreneurial intentions among youth, particularly in digitally advanced emerging economies such as Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

2.1. Digital Entrepreneurship Context

Entrepreneurship is widely conceptualized as the development of innovative products or services to create value and seize business opportunities, a concept gaining heightened attention in the twenty-first century (Chaudhary and Biswas, 2024; Shahid *et al.*, 2025). The digital era has brought a notable evolution of this concept in the form of e-entrepreneurship, which entails initiating and managing ventures using online platforms such as social media, e-commerce sites, and digital marketplaces (Li and Kang, 2024). E-entrepreneurship enables individuals, particularly young people, to launch technology-driven ventures from home with minimal financial, legal, and infrastructural barriers (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Khan and Shahid, 2025). This form of entrepreneurship not only fosters economic development and job creation but also nurtures intrapreneurial behavior (Cheng, Zhou, *et al.*, 2024).

E-entrepreneurial intention reflects an individual's cognitive willingness to establish an online business (Lai and To, 2020). Previous research has highlighted that digital platforms serve not only as marketplaces but also as learning environments where users acquire entrepreneurial knowledge and competencies (Li and Kang, 2024; Secundo *et al.*, 2021). Yet, despite the prominence of digital ventures, the role of social influencers, particularly social media, in shaping entrepreneurial intentions remains underexplored (Abbasianchavari and Moritz, 2021; Rudeloff and Damms, 2023; Tang and Cui, 2025).

Given that the digital environments in which e-entrepreneurship unfolds are deeply generational, it is critical to distinguish how Millennials and Gen Z engage with these environments with varying intensity (Calvo-Porrall and Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019). Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, and Generation Z, born from 1997 onwards, are particularly embedded in digital ecosystems (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024; Saeedikiya *et al.*, 2024). While Millennials have witnessed the adoption of digital technologies over time, Generation Z represents the first entirely digitally native cohort, deeply immersed in online social networks (Bhatnagr and Rajesh, 2025). Recent evidence shows that Generation Z uses social media more intensively for information seeking, content consumption, and commerce, relying on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024; Saeedikiya *et al.*, 2024). Their digital fluency and comfort with technology also translate into a stronger orientation toward social media-driven entrepreneurship, flexible working models, and creative ventures, compared to Millennials, who tend to favor more traditional business models (Chaudhary and Biswas, 2024; Li and Kang, 2024). These generational differences in digital engagement, social influence, and entrepreneurial orientation are crucial to understanding e-entrepreneurial intentions across generations.

2.2 Social Media Influencers and Generational Dynamics: Theory of Planned Behavior

Social media influencers are individuals with significant online followings who shape user attitudes and behaviors through authentic, relatable, and consistent content (Kay *et al.*, 2020). Influencers differ in scale, ranging from mega and macro to micro and nano, and their impact depends on perceived credibility, expertise, and follower engagement (Conde and Casais, 2023; Sardar and Vijay, 2025). Among Millennials and Generation Z, influencers increasingly serve as role models, shaping career aspirations, lifestyle preferences, and entrepreneurial intentions

(Abbasianchavari and Moritz, 2021; Angmo and Mahajan, 2024). Recent studies indicate that social media influencers not only shape lifestyle and consumption but also guide entrepreneurial learning, risk-taking attitudes, and venture-creation strategies (Çela *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, government programs in emerging economies, such as Pakistan, further emphasize the importance of e-entrepreneurship (Khan and Shahid, 2025; Shahid, Mei, *et al.*, 2024). Initiatives such as the e-Rozgaar program by the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB) have trained thousands of individuals in freelancing and generated substantial earnings (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2020). Similarly, the She-Wins initiative provides digital marketing and e-commerce skills to women, with support from corporate partners. However, the synergistic role of influencers in amplifying these initiatives and shaping youth entrepreneurial outcomes remains underexplored, highlighting a key research gap this study addresses.

The theory of planned behavior provides a framework to understand how external influences, such as social media influencers, affect behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). According to the theory, behavioral intentions are determined by three core cognitive constructs: attitude toward behavior, perceived behavioral control, and perceived subjective norms (Ajzen, 2011; Conner, 2020). In the context of e-entrepreneurship, attitude toward the behavior refers to an individual's evaluation of establishing a digital venture, perceived behavioral control represents confidence in one's entrepreneurial abilities, and perceived subjective norms capture the perceived social endorsement of entrepreneurial choices (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023). Recent empirical evidence supports the mediating role of these cognitive factors in digital entrepreneurial contexts, reinforcing the theoretical relevance of applying cognition-based theorization (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Qasim *et al.*, 2024). We argue that parasocial relationships with social media influencers function as critical antecedents that shape these cognitive determinants. Influencers serve as

accessible role models who exemplify entrepreneurial success, demonstrate strategies for recognizing opportunities, and signal societal approval of digital ventures (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Tang and Cui, 2025). Through repeated exposure to influencers' narratives, followers internalize entrepreneurial attitudes, enhance their self-efficacy, and perceive social norms that validate venture creation (Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024; Woodroof *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, these parasocial interactions indirectly guide the formation of e-entrepreneurial intentions by strengthening the underlying cognitive pathways identified in the theory of planned behavior. Figure 1 presents the hypothesized research model.

*****Insert Figure 1 here*****

2.3 Hypothesis Development

Parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions: Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional bonds in which followers perceive media figures as friends, mentors, or role models, forming cognitive and emotional connections without direct reciprocity (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Conde and Casais, 2023). Social media influencers serve as contemporary media personas who engage followers through regular content sharing, live interactions, and personal storytelling across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024; Secundo *et al.*, 2021). These interactions cultivate a sense of intimacy, trust, and loyalty, prompting followers to adopt and internalize the behaviors, attitudes, and values exhibited by influencers (Çela *et al.*, 2025; Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024; Masuda *et al.*, 2022). As followers increasingly identify with these digital role models, they are more likely to develop motivation, confidence, and positive perceptions toward engaging in entrepreneurial activities (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022).

Influencers who narrate their entrepreneurial journeys, including both successes and challenges, act as informal role models who implicitly teach entrepreneurial skills such as opportunity recognition, problem-solving, and risk management (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2024; Kay *et al.*, 2020). Such narratives represent a form of digital experiential learning, complementing formal entrepreneurship education and mentorship (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025). By observing the real-world challenges and successes shared by influencers, followers gain practical insights and actionable knowledge that can directly inform their own venture creation (Tang and Cui, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that followers with stronger parasocial relationships exhibit higher trust, greater engagement, and an increased likelihood of modeling observed behaviors, which can extend beyond consumer choices to entrepreneurial intentions (Abbasianchavari and Moritz, 2021; Childers and Boatwright, 2021; Troise *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, we argue that parasocial relationships with influencers shape the cognitive determinants of entrepreneurial behavior. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Parasocial relationships positively influence cognitive factors of the theory of planned behavior, including (a) attitude toward behavior, (b) perceived behavioral control, and (c) perceived subjective norms.

Beyond influencing cognitive determinants, parasocial relationships can directly affect e-entrepreneurial intentions (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Qasim *et al.*, 2024). By observing influencers who actively engage in digital venture creation, followers may develop greater interest and motivation to pursue similar ventures (Tang and Cui, 2025). This effect operates through two key mechanisms. First, aspirational identification happens when followers view influencers as role models and try to emulate their entrepreneurial journeys (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2024). Second, perceived realism functions as followers' belief that the

experiences and successes portrayed by influencers are attainable and relevant in their own context (Saeedikiya *et al.*, 2024). These mechanisms allow followers to internalize both the appeal and practical feasibility of digital venture creation, thereby strengthening their intention to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Sardar and Vijay, 2025; Woodroof *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Parasocial relationships positively influence e-entrepreneurial intentions.

Theory of planned behavior cognitive factors as mediators: While social media influencers can shape intentions, turning these influences into action depends on internal thought processes (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023). The theory of planned behavior offers a structured framework for examining this process, positing that attitudes toward the behavior, perceived behavioral control, and perceived subjective norms mutually predict intentions and mediate the effects of external social stimuli (Ajzen, 1991, 2011). Empirical evidence indicates that these constructs consistently mediate the impact of digital exposure, social learning, and entrepreneurial knowledge on entrepreneurial intentions across diverse cultural and demographic contexts (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023; Qasim *et al.*, 2024).

Attitude toward the behavior: Attitude toward the behavior refers to an individual's overall evaluation of performing a specific action (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023), in this case, engaging in e-entrepreneurship. A favorable attitude arises when the behavior is perceived as rewarding, valuable, and personally meaningful, encompassing benefits such as financial independence, flexible lifestyle, creative autonomy, and self-actualization (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Qasim *et al.*, 2024). Parasocial relationships with influencers shape attitudes through vicarious inspiration, leading followers to internalize the excitement and satisfaction associated with entrepreneurial

activities. Additionally, behavioral validation occurs as influencers demonstrate that entrepreneurship aligns with personal goals and identity, helping followers see entrepreneurship as meaningful and rewarding (Saeedikiya *et al.*, 2024). Observational learning from social media influencers' entrepreneurial journeys can strengthen attitudes by demonstrating that successful digital ventures are achievable (Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024; Secundo *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, we argue that attitude toward the behavior serves as a key mediator linking parasocial relationships with social media influencers to e-entrepreneurial intentions.

H3(a): Attitude toward behavior positively influences e-entrepreneurial intentions.

H4(a): Attitude toward behavior mediates the relationship between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions.

Perceived behavioral control: Perceived behavioral control reflects the individual's confidence in their ability to execute entrepreneurial tasks and manage a venture successfully (Conner, 2020). Higher levels of perceived control increase the likelihood that intentions will translate into actual behavior (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023; Sharma *et al.*, 2026). Parasocial relationships with influencers enhance perceived behavioral control through two mechanisms. Observational mastery occurs when followers witness influencers navigating practical challenges, thereby increasing followers' confidence in their own ability to manage similar tasks (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025). Informational scaffolding arises when influencers share step-by-step processes for digital venture creation, providing followers with procedural guidance that reduces perceived complexity and enhances capability (Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024; Rudeloff and Damms, 2023). In this way, followers gain both knowledge and confidence, which strengthens their ability to act

on entrepreneurial intentions (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023). Thus, we propose that perceived behavioral control mediates the effect of parasocial relationships on e-entrepreneurial intentions.

H3(b): Perceived behavioral control positively influences e-entrepreneurial intentions.

H4(b): Perceived behavioral control mediates the relationship between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions.

Perceived Subjective Norms: Perceived subjective norms capture the social expectations and pressures that individuals perceive regarding a particular behavior, including the approval of family, peers, and digital opinion leaders (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Conner, 2020). In the digital ecosystem, social media influencers reinforce these norms by signaling societal endorsement of entrepreneurial engagement (Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024). Parasocial relationships with influencers shape subjective norms through two complementary mechanisms. Norm signaling occurs as influencers publicly endorse digital entrepreneurship and highlight the social value of entrepreneurial engagement (Çela *et al.*, 2025; Sardar and Vijay, 2025). Community alignment arises when followers observe peer engagement with influencer content and feel aligned with broader digital communities that value venture creation (Chaudhary and Biswas, 2024). Empirical research confirms that perceived subjective norms mediate the translation of social influence into entrepreneurial intentions (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, we argue that perceived subjective norms mediate the relationship between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions.

H3(c): Perceived subjective norms positively influence e-entrepreneurial intentions.

H4(c): Perceived subjective norms mediate the relationship between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research setting: The context of Pakistan

This study was conducted in Pakistan, a developing country with a growing digital economy and a rapidly expanding youth population (Afshan *et al.*, 2021; Shahid, Mei, *et al.*, 2024). The research focused on Punjab province, which is particularly notable for its large cohort of young individuals, extensive use of social media platforms, and an emerging online entrepreneurship ecosystem (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2020; World-Bank, 2023). In recent years, the provincial and federal governments have launched multiple digital-skill development initiatives, such as youth freelancing programs, entrepreneurship training schemes, and digital-literacy campaigns (Shahid *et al.*, 2025), which have strengthened the region's digital infrastructure and encouraged participation in online business activities. These political and economic conditions create an environment in which young people increasingly rely on digital spaces for learning, earning, and entrepreneurial exploration.

The study targeted millennials (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997 onward), given their high engagement with digital technologies and social media influencers, as well as their receptivity to online entrepreneurial opportunities (Calvo-Porrall and Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019; Lyons *et al.*, 2015). While Punjab's political and economic context is specific, its strong emphasis on digitalization reflects broader patterns observed in many developing countries undergoing digital transformation (Khan and Shahid, 2025; Shahid, Mei, *et al.*, 2024). As in other emerging economies, young people increasingly use social media for learning, role modeling, and entrepreneurial exploration (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Li and Kang, 2024; Qasim *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, this setting offers a relevant and transferable context for examining how

parasocial relationships shape e-entrepreneurial intentions in digitally transitioning economies. Figure 2 provides an overview of the research methodology.

*****Insert Figure 2 here*****

3.2 Data collection and sample

A structured, cross-sectional, time-lagged survey design was employed, following ethical considerations that included obtaining verbal consent, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring anonymity (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024; Shahid, 2023). Data were collected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling allowed access to readily available participants, while snowball sampling facilitated outreach to a broader network, particularly within the targeted demographic (Audemard, 2020). A priori power analysis determined that a minimum of 129 responses would be sufficient to detect effects with four predictors, an effect size of $f^2 = 0.15$, and a statistical power of 0.95 (Wolf *et al.*, 2013). Using the rule of thumb that the target sample size should be 5 to 10 times the number of indicators (23 items including control variables), the target sample size ranged from 190 to 380 respondents (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

To reduce common method variance, a two-phase data collection strategy was adopted (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012; Shahid, 2023). In Phase 1, data on demographic, control, dependent, and independent variables were collected via online and paper-based surveys. To ensure that the same participants could be followed in Phase 2, each respondent was assigned a unique identification number and also asked to provide their email address. These identifiers allowed the research team to match responses across the two phases while maintaining confidentiality accurately. Phase 2, conducted 20 days later, collected data on mediating variables. Out of 550 questionnaires distributed in Phase I, 445 complete responses were returned. In Phase II, follow-up with initial respondents yielded 381 valid responses, resulting in a final response rate of 69%.

Screening questions ensured inclusion of active social media users from the target generations. Demographic and sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The final sample consisted of 381 respondents, comprising 37% millennials and 63% Generation Z. The gender distribution was 48% male and 52% female. Most participants were single (76%) and had bachelor's degrees (56%). In terms of occupation, 49% were students, 37% employed, and 8% self-employed. Social media usage varied, with 41% of respondents reporting 2–3 hours of daily use. Approximately 35% reported having an entrepreneurial family background, 31% had previous business experience, and 69% exhibited a high propensity for risk-taking. About 27% had received incubation training.

*****Insert Table 1 here*****

3.3 Measures

A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was employed, with all items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). To ensure contextual relevance, wording adjustments were made, such as replacing “celebrity” with “social media influencers.” Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents to refine clarity and comprehension, and two subject experts reviewed the items to confirm content validity (Shahid, Mei, *et al.*, 2024). Parasocial relationships with influencers were measured using a three-item scale adapted from Masuda et al. (2022) and Rudeloff and Damms (2023), with an example item being “I like the way social media influencers handle problems.” Attitude toward behavior (e-entrepreneurship) was assessed with four items from Lai and To (2020), sample item including “e-entrepreneurship is attractive to me because it provides opportunities for personal achievement.” Perceived behavioral control was captured through four items

adapted from (Lai and To, 2020; Solesvik, 2013), for example, “If I wanted to, I could easily become an entrepreneur.” Perceived subjective norms were measured with three items based on (Lai and To, 2020; Miralles *et al.*, 2016) , such as “If I were to start my own digital business, my parents would be supportive.” Finally, e-entrepreneurial intentions were evaluated using five items from (Lai and To, 2020), with a sample item being “I plan to start an e-business in the future.” The complete questionnaire is provided in the appendix.

In addition, four control variables were included: marital status, family background, prior business experience, and risk-taking propensity. These were selected to account for differences in financial responsibility, early business exposure, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and behavioral tendencies (Abdelfattah *et al.*, 2022; Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Shahid, Mei, *et al.*, 2024).

3.4 Analytical strategy

Structural equation modeling using partial least squares was employed to estimate the hypothesized relationships. This approach was chosen because it is particularly well-suited for predictive and exploratory research. It accommodates complex models with multiple constructs, and performs reliably with moderate sample sizes and data that do not strictly follow a normal distribution (Hair *et al.*, 2014). The analysis was carried out using SmartPLS and followed a two-stage process. First, the measurement model was assessed to establish the reliability of the constructs and to confirm both convergent and discriminant validity. Once the reliability of the measurement model was verified, the structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized paths, including the mediation effects, with statistical significance determined through bootstrapping procedures (Hair *et al.*, 2014; Hulland, 1999).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Measurement model evaluation

The measurement model was assessed by examining reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity following established procedures in partial least squares structural equation modeling (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Indicator reliability was confirmed with factor loadings above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, with many exceeding 0.80, indicating strong item relevance (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Internal consistency was supported, as all Cronbach's alphas and composite reliabilities exceeded 0.70. Convergent validity was demonstrated with average variance extracted values above 0.50 across all constructs, indicating adequate shared variance (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hulland, 1999). Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio. In each case, diagonal values exceeded inter-construct correlations, items loaded higher on their intended constructs, and all Heterotrait–Monotrait values were below the 0.85 threshold (Ab Hamid *et al.*, 2017). In addition, multicollinearity was not an issue, as all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 2 (Thompson *et al.*, 2017). These results, presented in Table 2, collectively demonstrate the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

*****Insert Table 2 here*****

4.2 Structural equation modeling estimates

The hypothesized paths were estimated using partial least squares structural equation modeling with 5,000 bootstrapping resamples. The results are presented in Table 3 for the entire sample and for the Gen Z and Millennial sub-samples. The analysis revealed that parasocial relationships with influencers significantly influenced the cognitive components of the theory of planned

behavior, although generational differences emerged. Specifically, the findings from the complete sample confirm that parasocial relationships with influencers positively influence attitudes toward the behavior (H1a: $\beta = 0.281$, $p < 0.01$), perceived behavioral control (H2: $\beta = 0.162$, $p < 0.01$), and perceived subjective norms ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.01$), fully supporting H1a, H2b, and H3c. However, the sub-sample analysis reveals generational differences. For Generation Z, parasocial relationships positively influenced attitudes toward the behavior ($\beta = 0.335$, $p < 0.01$), perceived behavioral control ($\beta = 0.190$, $p < 0.01$), and perceived subjective norms ($\beta = 0.250$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, for Millennials, only perceived behavioral control was significantly affected ($\beta = 0.121$, $p < 0.01$), whereas attitudes toward the behavior and perceived subjective norms were not. These results indicate that the influence of parasocial relationships is stronger and more multidimensional for Generation Z, whereas for Millennials, it is limited to enhancing perceived behavioral control, with no significant effect on attitudes or subjective norms.

Direct effects of parasocial relationships on e-entrepreneurial intentions were not significant for any group; therefore, hypothesis 2 is not supported. This indicates that the theory of planned behavior components fully mediates the effect of parasocial relationships with influencers on e-entrepreneurial intentions.

*****Insert Table 3 here*****

Furthermore, hypotheses 3(a–c) examined the direct effects of the theory of planned behavior components on e-entrepreneurial intentions. The findings reveal that attitudes toward the behavior ($\beta = 0.293$, $p < 0.01$ for the complete sample; $\beta = 0.305$, $p < 0.01$ for Generation Z; $\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.01$ for Millennials) and perceived behavioral control ($\beta = 0.201$, $p < 0.01$ for the

complete sample; $\beta = 0.178$, $p < 0.01$ for Generation Z; $\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.05$ for Millennials) significantly predicted e-entrepreneurial intentions, while subjective norms did not. Therefore, hypotheses 3a and 3b are supported, whereas hypothesis 3c is not supported.

In addition, mediation analysis confirmed that attitudes toward behavior significantly mediated the relationship between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions for the complete and Generation Z sample ($\beta = 0.082$, $p < 0.01$ for the complete sample; $\beta = 0.102$, $p < 0.01$ for Generation Z), supporting H4a; however, the result is insignificant for the Millennial sample. The mediation effect of perceived behavioral control between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions is fully supported for both the complete and subgroup samples ($\beta = 0.032$, $p < 0.01$ for the complete sample; $\beta = 0.029$, $p < 0.01$ for Generation Z; $\beta = 0.034$, $p < 0.05$ for Millennials), fully supporting H4b. Finally, the mediation effect of perceived subjective norms on the relationship between parasocial relationships and e-entrepreneurial intentions is not significant in any sample; therefore, H4c is not supported.

The model demonstrated moderate explanatory power for e-entrepreneurial intentions, with R-squared values of 0.422 for Generation Z, 0.322 for Millennials, and 0.382 for the complete sample, alongside adequate predictive relevance. These findings suggest that parasocial relationships influence e-entrepreneurial intentions primarily by shaping attitudes and perceived control, with Generation Z being more susceptible to influencer-led perceptions.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined the impact of parasocial relationships with social media influencers on e-entrepreneurial intentions among young generations, focusing on the cognitive mechanisms underlying the theory of planned behavior. The findings show that parasocial relationships

significantly influence attitudes toward behavior and perceived behavioral control, which, in turn, drive e-entrepreneurial intentions. In contrast, perceived subjective norms did not exert a significant effect and did not mediate any pathway in the model. These results highlight the pivotal role of one-way digital interactions with influencers in forming internal cognitive and motivational mechanisms, rather than relying on social pressure or approval (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023).

The insignificance of subjective norms contrasts with several prior studies, such as (Al-Jubari *et al.*, 2019), which found that social norms are a strong predictor of traditional entrepreneurial intention. A plausible explanation is that digital entrepreneurship is fundamentally self-driven and shaped by personalized online experiences, in which young individuals rely on influencers as aspirational role models rather than on family, friends, or societal pressure (Çela *et al.*, 2025; Saeedikiya *et al.*, 2024). This aligns with research showing that modern digital environments prioritize individualized motivation and perceived capability over conformity to others' expectations (Chaudhary and Biswas, 2024). Additionally, our findings also suggest that strong parasocial bonds affect behavior mainly through attitudes and perceived control, rather than through social norms. Thus, social norms lose explanatory power when internalized, and self-referential motivations dominate the formation of intentions.

Furthermore, generational differences further enrich these insights. Contrary to the initial interpretation, the results indicate that Generation Z shows stronger responsiveness to influencer-driven cues, particularly through attitudinal and self-efficacy mechanisms. This suggests that younger digital natives are more attuned to influencer content, using it as a basis for forming entrepreneurial confidence and favorable evaluations of e-entrepreneurship (Saeedikiya *et al.*, 2024; Zhong *et al.*, 2024). Millennials, while still influenced, demonstrate comparatively weaker

effects from parasocial relationships. This does not imply that Millennials deviate from the theory of planned behavior; rather, it indicates that the theory's components are more strongly activated among Gen Z, whose digital socialization amplifies the influence of attitudinal and control beliefs. These findings contribute to the growing literature on digital entrepreneurial behavior by reinforcing the strategic role of influencers as meaningful catalysts for e-entrepreneurial engagement and highlighting the need to refine cognition-based theorizing for digital entrepreneurial contexts.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, this study extends influencer marketing research beyond its traditional focus on consumer behavior by examining its implications for entrepreneurial intentions (Cheng, de Regt, *et al.*, 2024; Troise *et al.*, 2022). Previous research has mostly investigated influencers in the context of product promotion and consumer decision-making (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024; Kay *et al.*, 2020; Troise *et al.*, 2022). This study demonstrates that parasocial relationships with influencers can also shape career-oriented behaviors, particularly e-entrepreneurial intentions (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2024). By revealing that influencers affect intentions indirectly through cognitive mechanisms, the study broadens the scope of influencer marketing from consumption to entrepreneurial engagement.

Second, the study advances entrepreneurial marketing theory by conceptualizing influencers as digital role models who affect entrepreneurial attitudes and perceived behavioral control. Attitudes toward behavior and perceived control were found to be significant mediators of the relationship between parasocial relationships and entrepreneurial intentions, whereas subjective norms were not influential, highlighting the centrality of self-driven motivational processes in

digital contexts (Aloulou *et al.*, 2024; Tang and Cui, 2025). By illustrating how influencers enhance confidence of starting digital ventures, the study provides theoretical evidence that virtual mentorship and aspirational modeling are critical mechanisms in shaping entrepreneurial intentions. The generational differences, with Generation Z being more sensitive to influencer cues, further underscore how digital socialization affects the translation of role modeling into intentions (Calvo-Porrall and Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019; Zhong *et al.*, 2024).

Third, the study integrates the parasocial relationship perspective with the theory of planned behavior to develop a novel framework that explains how social and psychological processes interact to shape entrepreneurial outcomes (Ajzen, 2011; Rudeloff and Damms, 2023). By linking one-way digital engagements with internal cognitive mechanisms, the research provides a clear mechanism through which influencer-led content can indirectly foster e-entrepreneurial intentions (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Tang and Cui, 2025). This integration enhances the explanatory power of the theory of planned behavior in digital contexts and bridges the influence of social media with established behavioral theories.

Fourth, by situating the study in Pakistan, a leading digital freelancing economy, the research provides important insights into how influencers act as catalysts for e-entrepreneurship among digitally engaged youth, with implications for other emerging and digitally connected markets as well (Foo *et al.*, 2020; Khan and Shahid, 2025). The findings indicate that internal cognitive evaluations, such as attitudes and perceived behavioral control, are more influential than social pressures, even within collectivist cultural settings (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023). This highlights a shift in the traditional determinants of entrepreneurial behavior, emphasizing the growing importance of self-driven motivation and individualized learning in digitally mediated environments. Generational differences further show that digital role models

have a strong influence on Generation Z. This group relies more on influencer content to build e-entrepreneurial intention, a pattern likely seen in other contexts where social media shapes youth aspirations.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several actionable insights for promoting e-entrepreneurship among the young generation through influencer-driven strategies. Social media influencers can act as virtual mentors, inspiring entrepreneurial attitudes and enhancing perceived feasibility, particularly among Generation Z, who are more responsive to influencer-led cues (Olanrewaju *et al.*, 2020; Secundo *et al.*, 2021). Organizations, entrepreneurship development agencies, and incubators can partner with influencers to deliver structured online workshops, share real-life entrepreneurial journeys, and showcase step-by-step guidance on venture creation (Abu Shriha *et al.*, 2025; Al-Jubari *et al.*, 2019). These collaborations can help build youth confidence, highlight achievable pathways, and motivate active participation in digital ventures. Educational institutions can incorporate influencer-based learning into curricula through guest lectures, case studies, and interactive webinars, allowing students to observe practical entrepreneurial decision-making and internalize entrepreneurial skills.

Policymakers and digital platforms can also leverage the influence of social media figures to stimulate e-entrepreneurship (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024). Campaigns can include mentorship initiatives, virtual bootcamps, and awareness programs that highlight digital business opportunities and practical startup guidance. Platforms can use analytics to identify high-impact content. They can then optimize engagement strategies to strengthen followers' self-efficacy and intentions to pursue e-ventures (Saeedikiya *et al.*, 2024). By combining influencer engagement

with structured educational programs and policy support, stakeholders can build a supportive ecosystem. This ecosystem can help digitally native cohorts turn inspiration into action, pursue entrepreneurial goals with confidence, and sustain their involvement in online business activities.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study provides novel insights into the influence of parasocial relationships with influencers on e-entrepreneurial intentions, yet several limitations suggest avenues for future research. First, the sample was drawn exclusively from the Punjab province in Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultural and economic contexts (Shahid, Mei, *et al.*, 2024). Cross-cultural replications are therefore essential to validate the proposed model globally. Second, although data were collected in two waves to reduce common method variance, the design remains essentially cross-sectional (Kundi and Shahid, 2023). Longitudinal studies could better capture how parasocial relationships and the theory of planned behavior constructs evolve over time and whether intentions translate into actual entrepreneurial behavior. Third, the nature of the sample and the measurement method do not allow for causal inferences. To establish causal effects or test the bidirectional nature of the relationships, experimental or scenario-based approaches may be highly relevant for advancing this line of research (Ricard *et al.*, 2025; Shahid, Liouka, *et al.*, 2024).

Fourth, although subjective norms were not significant in this study, this does not diminish their potential importance. Instead, it suggests the need for future research to re-examine how social norms operate in digital contexts, where peer influence, community belonging, and online group identity may shape entrepreneurial decisions differently than traditional interpersonal norms (Al-Jubari *et al.*, 2019). Future studies should also examine whether new forms of digital social

norms, such as influencer community norms or online peer-group expectations, shape e-entrepreneurial intention. These directions can clarify how evolving social dynamics in digital spaces influence youth entrepreneurial behavior. Fifth, parasocial relationships were the only influencer-related variable assessed; future research could incorporate additional factors such as influencer credibility, content authenticity, attitude homophily, and opinion leadership to develop a more comprehensive understanding of influencer-driven entrepreneurship (Conde and Casais, 2023; Rudeloff and Damms, 2023; Tang and Cui, 2025). Finally, the study did not differentiate between types of social media influencers, leaving open the question of how niche versus mainstream influencers may differentially impact e-entrepreneurial intentions across user segments.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of social media influencers on e-entrepreneurial intentions through parasocial relationships, using the theory of planned behavior as a mediating framework. Data were collected from a sample of digitally active Millennials and Generation Z participants to empirically test the proposed relationships. The findings demonstrate that parasocial relationships significantly shape attitudes toward behavior and perceived behavioral control, which in turn influence e-entrepreneurial intentions, particularly among Generation Z, who exhibit heightened responsiveness to influencer-led cues. By integrating parasocial relationships into the theory of planned behavior, this research advances theoretical understanding of digital-era entrepreneurship and highlights the transformative role of influencers as virtual mentors in shaping youth career intentions. These insights provide a foundation for future cross-cultural studies and inform practical strategies to leverage influencer-driven motivation for entrepreneurship development. Additionally, organizations and policymakers can use these

findings to design targeted influencer-led initiatives that enhance youth's entrepreneurial skills and confidence.

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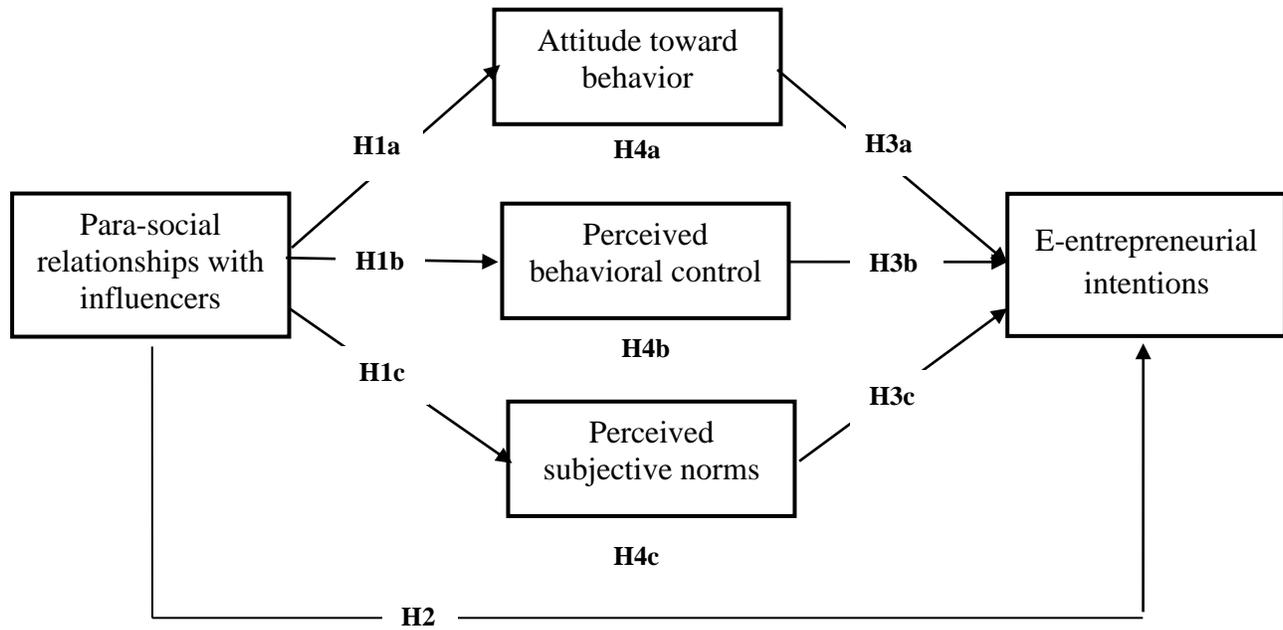


Figure 1. Hypothesized research model.

Source: Author's own work

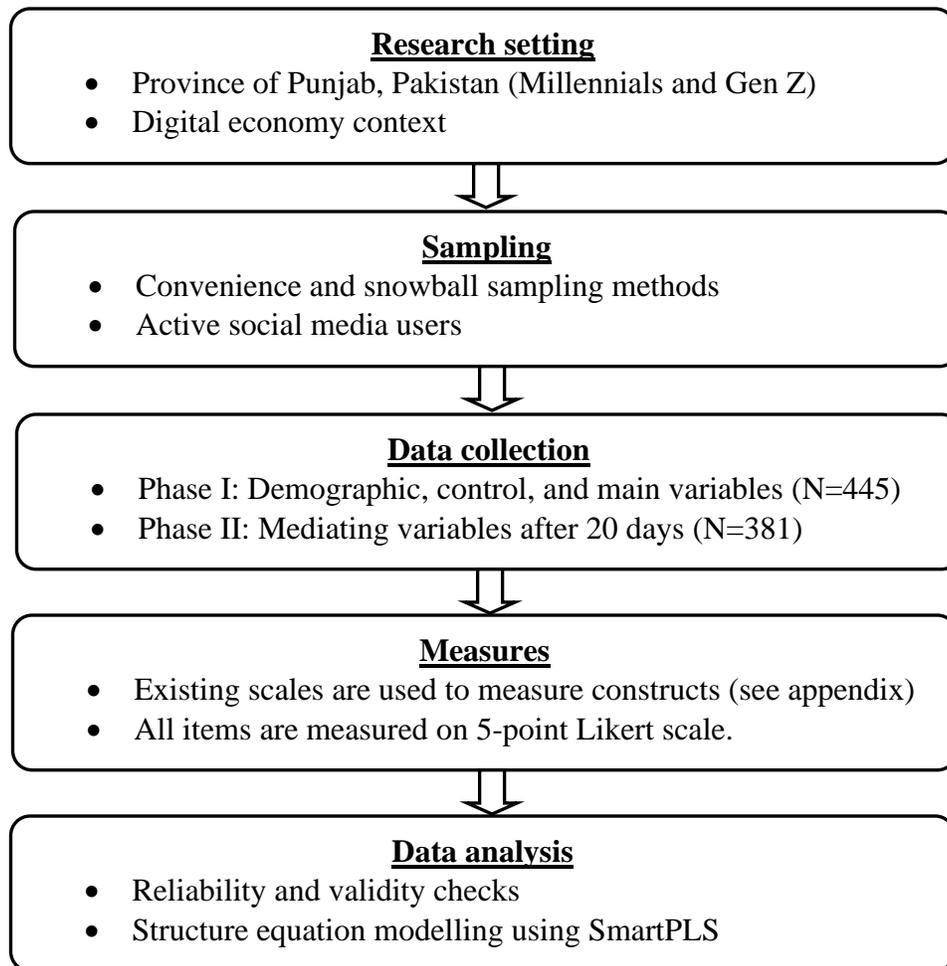


Figure 2. Research methodology flowchart.

Source: Author's own work

Table 1. Respondents' profiles and characteristics						
<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Total</i>		<i>Millennials (N = 141)</i>		<i>Gen Z (N=240)</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	182	48	81	57	101	42
Female	199	52	60	42	139	57
<i>Marital status</i>						
Married	92	24	73	52	19	8
Single	289	76	68	48	221	92
<i>Educational level</i>						
Intermediate	34	9	8	6	26	11
Bachelor	214	56	62	44	152	63
Master	116	30	56	40	60	25
PhD	14	4	12	9	2	1
Diplomas, certificates, or others	3	1	3	2	0	0
<i>Occupation</i>						
Student	186	49	15	11	171	71
Jobholder	140	37	91	65	49	20
Self-employed	30	8	19	14	11	5
Others	25	7	16	11	9	4
<i>Social media usage time in Hours</i>						
1hr or less	35	9	14	10	21	9
2-3	157	41	63	45	94	39
4-5	112	29	45	32	67	28
5 or above	72	19	15	11	57	24
No Usage	5	1	4	3	1	0
<i>Family background</i>						
Entrepreneurial	135	35	44	31	91	38
Non-Entrepreneurial	246	65	97	69	149	62
<i>Previous business experience</i>						
Yes	119	31	46	33	73	30
No	262	69	95	67	167	70
<i>Incubation training</i>						
Yes	102	27	35	25	67	28
No	279	73	106	75	173	72
<i>Propensity to take risks</i>						
Yes	264	69	90	64	174	73
No	117	31	51	36	66	28

Table 2. Measurement model evaluation

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	VIF	\sqrt{AVE} (Diagonal)	Correlations (inter-construct)	HTMT Range
Parasocial Relationship	0.82	0.84	0.55	1.50	0.74	0.16–0.28	0.20–0.34
Attitude to E-entrepreneurship	0.90	0.93	0.78	1.97	0.88	0.43–0.64	0.59–0.78
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.78	0.85	0.60	1.69	0.77	0.28–0.59	0.35–0.68
Perceived Subjective Norms	0.78	0.83	0.64	1.58	0.80	0.25–0.53	0.30–0.65
E-entrepreneurial Intentions	0.87	0.91	0.66	1.16	0.81	0.41–0.52	0.39–0.59

Notes: *CR* = Composite reliability; *AVE* = Average variance extracted; *VIF* = Variance inflation factor; *HTMT* = Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio.

Table 3. Measurement model evaluation

Hypothesis/Paths	Gen Z		Millennials		Complete	
	β	P-value	β	P-value	β	P-value
H1a: Parasocial relationships → Attitudes toward behavior	0.335*	0.000	0.191	0.096	0.281*	0.000
H1b: Parasocial relationships → Perceived behavioral control	0.190*	0.007	0.121*	0.009	0.162*	0.004
H1c: Parasocial relationships → Perceived subjective norms	0.250*	0.000	0.162	0.159	0.220*	0.000
H2: Parasocial relationships → E-entrepreneurial intentions	0.073	0.212	0.062	0.488	0.080	0.083
H3a: Attitudes toward behavior → E-entrepreneurial intentions	0.305*	0.001	0.296*	0.007	0.293*	0.000
H3b: Perceived behavioral control → E-entrepreneurial intentions	0.178*	0.024	0.236*	0.032	0.201*	0.001
H3c: Perceived subjective norms → E-entrepreneurial intentions	0.009	0.917	0.087	0.315	0.042	0.459
Mediating effects						
H4a: Parasocial relationships → Attitudes toward behavior → E-entrepreneurial intentions	0.102*	0.002	0.057	0.188	0.082*	0.001
H4b: Parasocial relationships → Perceived behavioral control → E-entrepreneurial intentions	0.034*	0.000	0.029*	0.003	0.032*	0.002
H4c: Parasocial relationships → Perceived subjective norms → E-entrepreneurial intentions	0.002	0.922	0.014	0.481	0.009	0.699
R-Squared (R ²)	0.422		0.322		0.382	
Adjusted R-squared (R ²)	0.397		0.328		0.369	
Predictive relevance (Q ²).	0.109		0.114		0.112	

Notes: * indicates p-value less than 0.01; results for control variables are omitted for brevity.

Appendix

Table A. Scale items and sources

Constructs	Measures
Parasocial relationship with influencers (Masuda et al. 2022; Rudeloff and Damms, 2023),	I watch social media influencers on all platforms. I enjoyed trying to predict what social media influencers would do. I like the way social media influencers handle problems.
Attitude towards behavior (e-entrepreneurship) (Lai & To, 2020)	E-entrepreneurship is attractive to me because it provides opportunities to validate my own ideas. E-entrepreneurship is attractive to me because it provides opportunities to challenge myself. E-entrepreneurship is attractive to me because it provides opportunities for personal achievement. E-entrepreneurship is attractive to me because it provides opportunities for personal independence.
Perceived behavioral control (Lai & To, 2020; Solesvik, 2013)	There would be plenty of e-entrepreneurial opportunities if I wanted to start my own e-business. As an entrepreneur, I would have sufficient control over my e-business. There are very few circumstances outside my control that may prevent me from becoming an e-entrepreneur. If I wanted to, I could easily become an entrepreneur
Perceived subjective norms (Lai & To, 2020; Miralles et al., 2016)	If I were to start my own e-business, my parents would be supportive If I were to start my own e-business, my relatives would be supportive If I were to start my own e-business, my close friends would be supportive.
E-entrepreneurial intentions (Lai & To, 2020)	I plan to start an e-business in the future. I am determined to create my e-business, even though I will encounter difficulties. I intend to start an e-business in the next five years. I have very seriously thought about starting an e-business. I am ready to do anything to be an e-entrepreneur.