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SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS AS DETERMINING FACTORS FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL CAREER PREFERENCE AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

Yakubu Abdullahi Yarima[1]

[1] Faculty of Management Sciences
Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Bauchi

Norashidah binti Hashim[2]

[2]School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia

[1]*Corresponding author: yakubuyerima318@yahoo.com*

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ABSTRACT

Enterprise and entrepreneurial activities are seen as a most important factors for economic growth and development in the post COVID-19 pandemic era which is term here as the "New Era". However, entrepreneurship education and training enhance individuals' entrepreneurial skills and attitude, hence promote entrepreneurial career preference. The study was designed to explore the mediating effect of entrepreneurial Skills on the relationship between supportive environment and entrepreneurial career preference among university students in Nigeria. The population of the study consist of a total of 36, 798 final year students from four areas of studies across six universities in northern Nigeria. The study used structural equation modelling Smart-PLS (3.0) to analysis the data obtained from a sample of 395 final year students cross six universities to test the hypotheses. The study established a significant positive association between internal supportive environment and the students' entrepreneurial career preference. However, the study found no significant association between external supportive environment and the students' entrepreneurial career preference. In addition, the study established that entrepreneurial skills significantly mediate the association between internal supportive environment, external supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference. The study provided suggestion for future research.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial career preference, internal supportive environment, external supportive environment, entrepreneurial skills, new era.

1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial career has been recognized as an integral part for the economic growth and development of any nation (Carland & Carland, 2020). It is an essential element for national development, through the economic growth across the world absolutely impacted by the emergence entrepreneurial activities (Fayolle, Benoit & Narjisse, 2016; Hattab, 2014). Accordingly, supportive environment plays an essential role in promoting entrepreneurial skills, competencies and attitudes in several ways which in turn encourages potential entrepreneurial career preference. Equally, supportive environment is considered as the most effective means of implanting entrepreneurial culture by developing students' entrepreneurial skills; and thereby increasing the supply of future graduate entrepreneurs (Jones, Miller, Jones, Packham, Pickenell, & Zbierowski, 2011; Sesen, 2013).

In the recent years, attention has been focused on entrepreneurial career as leading economic factor for creating job opportunities, economic growth, wealth creation, poverty reduction, and positive social development (Engle, Schlaegel & Dimitriadi, 2021; Falck, Heblich & Luedemann, 2022) However, Rae, Penaluna and Dhaliwal (2021) argue the need for universities to develop in their graduates an entrepreneurial mind-set, skills and experience as part of their program of study. Consequently, many countries to introduced policy structures to support entrepreneurial career choice and to promote entrepreneurial activity (Pittaway and Cope, 2017). Government and other stakeholders embrace a range supporting programs toward encouraging entrepreneurial career choice such as career guidance, funding, skill building courses, business, incubator and alike (Solomon et al., 2012); as well as the improvement in instructional quality. Similarly, the number of entrepreneurship programs offer by universities world over has dramatically increased in the past years (Kuratko, 2015; Brockhaus et al., 2011).

Moreover, there is growing interest by governments, universities, and other stakeholders in entrepreneurship education calls for further studies in the area. Although number of studies have already established link between entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurial attitudes and entrepreneurial intention (Souitaris et al., 2017). Nevertheless, relatively little direct evidence occurs concerning machineries through which entrepreneurship education encourages individuals toward entrepreneurial career preference. There is a lack of study on some areas of entrepreneurship education research including regional variations and cross-country comparisons. Nabi and Holden (2018) argued that there is need for more studies in different regional and international contexts to better understanding of students' entrepreneurial attitudes and developing more relevant education programs.

Hence, the aim of this study is to empirically investigate the mediating role of entrepreneurial skills on the relationship between supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference among university students in Nigeria. The study also provides statistical inference on the direct relationships supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference and makes suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurial career preference is described as a mental process that orientates the individual's decision to become an entrepreneur (Gupta & Bhawe, 2017). It is seen as conscious and precise decision made for preference of entrepreneurship as an alternative career option (Moriano, Gorgievski, Laguna, Stephan & Zarafshani, 2012). Accordingly, entrepreneurial career preference is frequently influenced by various factors such as the dynamic career environment, individual traits, financial aspects, educational elements, family related issues and role models (Liñán, Rodríguez-Cohard, & Rueda-Cantuche, 2011; Zhang, Duysters & Cloodt, 2013).

On the other hand, entrepreneurship education is seen as sequence of activities which targets to empower individual to promote and improve entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, values and indulgent that allow a wide variety of problems to be defined, analysed and resolved (Neck & Greene, 2011; Peterman & Kennedy, 2013). Subsequently, entrepreneurial skills promote entrepreneurial intentions and stimulates entrepreneurial awareness, which can be leveraged to discourse numerous subjective norms and resource barricades to entrepreneurial activities (Draycott & Rae, 2011; Packham, Jones, Miller, Pickernell, & Brychan, 2010; Verheul, Thurik, Grilo, & van der Zwan, 2012). In fact, there are substantial evidences supporting the positive link between entrepreneurial skills and new venture creation (Peterman & Kennedy, 2013; Pittaway & Cope, 2017).

Supportive environment is described as a combination of factors surrounding the business atmosphere that play a significant part in the promotion of entrepreneurial activities and entrepreneurial career preference (Franke & Luthje, 2014; Valliere & Peterson, 2019). Several studies reported that supportive environment in form of favourable regulatory, cognitive and normative institutions positively influence the rate of business start-ups and entrepreneurial career activities in an economy (Engle, Schlaegel & Dimitriadi, 2021; Falck, Heblich & Luedemann, 2022). Hence, this study proposed a model in which entrepreneurial skills play a critical mediating role (see Figure 1) in relationship between supportive environment and entrepreneurial career preference. Hence, the development of the following hypotheses:

H_1: Internal supportive environment will be positively related to students' entrepreneurial career preference.
H_2: External supportive environment will be positively related to students' entrepreneurial career preference.
H_3: Internal supportive environment will be positively related to entrepreneurial skills.
H_4: External supportive environment will be positively related to entrepreneurial skills.
H_5: Entrepreneurial skills will be positively related to students' entrepreneurial career preference.
H_6: Entrepreneurial skills mediate the relationship between internal supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference.
H_7: Entrepreneurial skills mediate the relationship between external supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants and procedures

In this study, a stratified random sampling technique was applied to select a sample of 395 final year students from a variety of academic arena including; agricultural science, business, engineering and technology across six universities in the Northern Nigeria. The survey was conducted using questionnaire forms which were personally administered to the respondents by the researchers and some faculty members at each of the six universities. Table 1 presents the demographic profile for the respondents of the study.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Respondents (n = 395)

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18-29	327	82.79
	30-39	58	14.68
	40-49	8	2.03
	50 & above	2	0.50
Gender	Male	261	66.08

	Female	134	33.92
Area of study	Business	182	46.08
	Agriculture	90	22.78
	Engineering	44	11.14
	Technology	79	20.00
Occupational experience	Self-employed	89	22.53
	Civil servant	61	15.44
	Working for others	44	11.14
	Apprenticeship	42	10.63
	Never employed	159	40.25

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Entrepreneurial career preference

Entrepreneurial career preference is operationalized as the conscious and precise decision made for preference of entrepreneurship as career (Moriano, et al., 2012). The entrepreneurial career preference was measured using 12 items adapted from the work of Moy Jane, Vivienne, Luk Philip and Wright (2013). However, the construct was initially measured using 12 items (Jane, et al., 2013) but here in this study the eleventh item "I prefer entrepreneurial career to recognize and exploit business opportunities" and twelfth item "I prefer entrepreneurial career to develop new ideas, innovations and initiatives" were divided into two items each because of their double barrel nature.

3.2.2 Internal Supportive Environment

Internal supportive environment is operationalized as university supported programs that play important roles in the development of students' entrepreneurial activities and entrepreneurial career preference as an alternative career option (Parnell, Crandall, & Menefee, 1995). In this study, we adapted 5 items of internal supportive environment from Turker, Onvural, Kursunluoglu, and Pinar, (2005). Though, some items in scale were slightly modified to reflect the current area of the study (Nigeria) rather than the place of its origin (Turkish). In addition, the second item in the original measures "my university provides the necessary knowledge and support about entrepreneurial career" was divided into two separate items to avoid double barrel question.

3.2.3 External Supportive Environment

Operationally, external supportive environment is a combination of external factors surrounding the business environment which play significant part in the formation and promotion of entrepreneurial career and entrepreneurial activities in a society. The scales used for measuring external supportive environment in the study were slightly adapted version used by Turker, et al., (2005). However, items two and three of the original measures "Taking loan from banks is quite difficult for graduate entrepreneurs" and "state laws are unfavourable for running businesses were modified to positive questions so as to tally with the other questions and to avoid misleading the respondents.

3.2.4 Entrepreneurial skills

Entrepreneurial skill is operationalized as individual student's ability to develop a concept and a business plan, perform environmental scanning and opportunity recognition; and networking (Chen, Greene & Crick, 1998). In this study, entrepreneurial skills were measured using six items also which were adapted from Liñán (2008). However, item four "I have the leadership and communication skills to manage my own business" and item six "I have the networking skills and professional contracts to

establish and manage my business" were divided into two items each because of the double barrel nature of the items. Table 2 presents the summary of the measures and sources.

Table 2

Summary of Measures of Variables

Variables	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha	Sources
Entrepreneurial career preference	14	0.78	Jane, et al., (2013)
Internal Supportive Environment	5	0.88	Turker, et al., (2005)
External Supportive Environment	5	0.86	Turker, et al., (2005)
Entrepreneurial skills	8	0.92	Liñán (2008).

Note: All variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

4.1 Data Analysis

A multivariate data analysis was conducted using Smart-PLS (version 2.0) to evaluate the measurement model and to test the formulated hypotheses of the study. The PLS-SEM technique was used in the study for its ability to evaluate the entire measurement model as a whole and analyse the association between the independent variables and the dependent variable; and their measures (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, (2010). The study applied PLS-SEM algorithm to evaluate the measurement model and the structural model was evaluated using PLS-SEM Bootstrapping; and the results were reported as such.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Measurement Model

Measurement model was used to assess the validity and reliability of the construct measures using PLS-SEM Algorithm (see Figure 2). Accordingly, Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt, (2013) recommend that validity and reliability index are the two main standards used in PLS-SEM analysis to evaluate the goodness of measurement model. The results in table 3 indicates the composite reliability of the latent constructs which ranges between 0.81 to 0.84 for the all the latent constructs; thus fulfilled the suggested level of 0.70 and above (Hair et al., 2010). In addition, the result shows that average variance extracted (AVE) stands between 0.52 to 0.53 which are all exceeded the threshold level of 0.50, thereby sustaining the convergent validity for all the latent constructs (Hair et al., 2013).

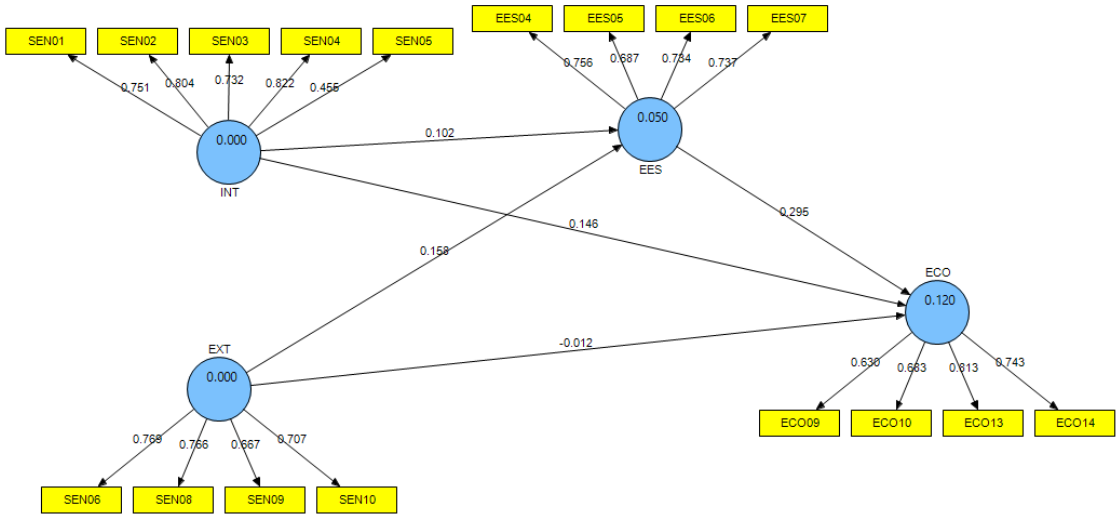

Figure 2: *PLS-SEM Algorithm*

Table 3

Indicators Loading, Internal Consistency and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Composite Reliability	AVE
Entrepreneurial career preference	ECP 09	0.630	0.81	0.52
	ECP 10	0.683		
	ECP 13	0.813		
	ECP 14	0.744		
Entrepreneurial Skills	EES 04	0.756	0.82	0.53
	EES 05	0.687		
	EES 06	0.734		
	EES 07	0.737		
Internal Supportive Environment	INT 01	0.751	0.82	0.53
	INT 02	0.804		
	INT 03	0.732		
	INT 04	0.822		
	INT 05	0.455		
External Supportive Environment	EXT 01	0.769	0.84	0.53
	EXT 03	0.766		
	EXT 04	0.667		
	EXT 05	0.707		

Furthermore, the result in table 4 displays the AVEs (diagonal side **in bold)** and the squared of inter-construct correlations (off the diagonal side). The result established that all the AVEs values are greater than the values of squared inter-constructs correlations; thus, satisfied the requirement for discriminant validity. Hence the study confirmed the reliability and validity of the latent variables (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012).

Table 4

Square Root of AVE and Correlation of Latent Variables

	1	2	3	4
Entrepreneurial career preference	**0.721**			
Entrepreneurial Skills	0.318	**0.729**		
Internal Supportive Environment	0.112	0.203	**0.729**	
External Supportive Environment	0.191	0.172	0.440	**0.725**

4.2 Structural Model

The structural model was assessed in this study using path coefficient and the R^2 value (Hair, et al., 2010). PLS-SEM bootstrapping was used at 5000 sub-sample to establish the significance of the path coefficients in the study (see Figure 3). The results in table 6 and 7 display the outcomes of the hypotheses test, path coefficients, t-values and p-values.

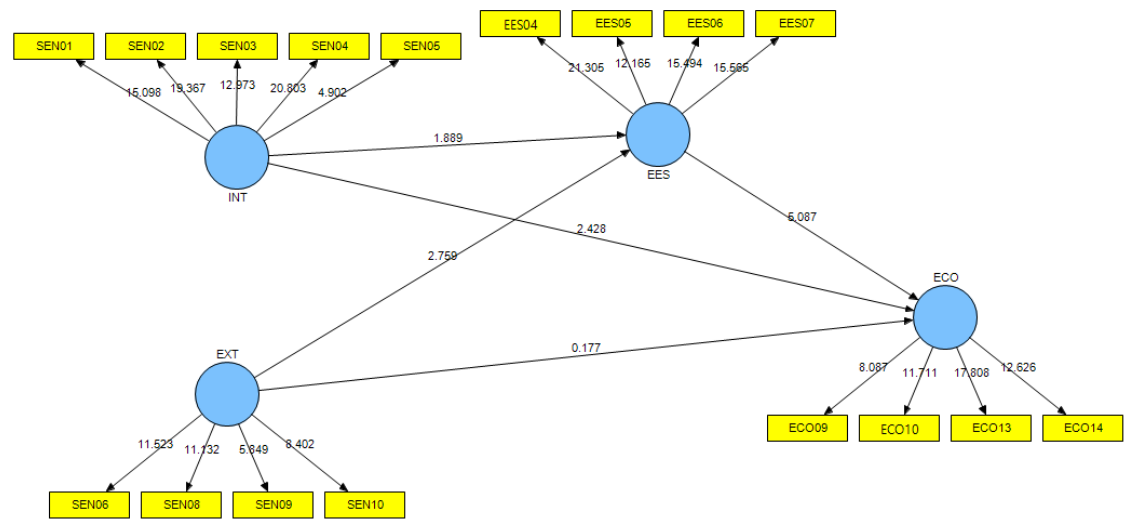

Figure 3: *PLS-SEM Bootstrapping*

Table 5

Path Coefficients and Hypotheses Testing (Direct Relationship)

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	Standard Error	T-value	P-value	Decision
H_1	INT-> ECP	0.146	0.060	2.428	0.01**	Supported
H_2	EXT -> ECP	-0.012	0.068	0.177	0.43	Not supported
H_3	INT -> EES	0.102	0.054	1.889	0.03*	Supported
H_4	EXT -> EES	0.158	0.057	2.759	0.00**	Supported
H_5	EES -> ECP	0.295	0.058	5.087	0.00**	Supported

Note: **Significant at 0.01 (1-tailed), *Significant at 0.05 (1-tailed).

Hypothesis 1 predicts a positive relationship between internal supportive environment and entrepreneurial career preference. Accordingly, the result in table 5 discloses that there is a positive and a significant relationship between internal supportive environment and entrepreneurial career preference (ß = 0.146, t = 2.428, p < 0.01); hence, H_1 is supported. In contrary, the result shows no significant relationship between external supportive environment and entrepreneurial career preference (ß = -0.012, t = 0.177, p < 0.43); therefore, H_2 is not supported. In addition, the result also reveals that a positive and significant relationship exist between internal supportive environment and entrepreneurial skills (ß = 0.102, t = 1.889, p < 0.03); thereby the result indicates support for H_3. Similarly, the result indicates that the relationship between external supportive environment and entrepreneurial skills is positively significant (ß = 0.158, t = 2.759, p < 0.00); henceforth supporting the H_4. Furthermore, the result submits that there is a positive and a significant relationship between entrepreneurial skills and entrepreneurial career preference (ß = 0.295, t = 5.087, p < 0.00); therefore,

Table 6

Path Coefficients and Hypotheses Testing (Indirect Relationship)

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	Std. Error	T-value	P-value	Decision
H_6	INT -> EES -> ECP	0.033	0.016	1.99	0.02*	Supported
H_7	EXT -> EES -> ECP	0.052	0.022	2.34	0.01**	Supported

Note: **Significant at 0.01, *Significant at 0.05.

Table 6 above, displays the results of indirect association between independent latent variables and the dependent latent variable through a mediating variable as assumed in hypothesis 6 and 7 of the study. Hypothesis 6 assumed entrepreneurial skills mediate the relationship between internal environment and entrepreneurial career preference, the result discloses the t-value of 1.99 (ß = 0.082, p < 0.00) is higher than threshold of 1.64 and above at 0.05 level of significance (Hair et al., 2010); hence H_6 is supported. The result in relation to H_7 shows t-value of 2.34 (ß = 0.052, p < 0.01) on association between external environment and entrepreneurial career preference using entrepreneurial skills as mediating variable. This t-value is greater than threshold value of 1.64 and above at 0.05 level of significance (Hair et al., 2010), demonstrating that entrepreneurial skills mediate the association between external environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The study was designed to empirically test the mediating effect of entrepreneurial Skills on the association between supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference. The study was conducted using a sample of final year students from different faculties across six universities in the northern Nigeria. The descriptive analysis of the respondents showed that majority were at the age bracket between 18 to 29 years (83%), while those at the age bracket of 30 and above constituted 17%; male respondents represented about 66% of the total respondents and female counterpart represented 34%. In this study, 46% of the respondents are studying business, 23% agriculture, 20% technology and 11% engineering. In addition, 40% of the respondents were never employed; 23% were self-employed; 15% were civil servants while working for others and apprenticeship accounted for 11% each. The descriptive analysis establishes that the respondents provide sufficient variance for the study of this nature.

As predicted, the result in relation to the H_1 was found to be positively significant; hence empirically the result supported H_1. This result coincides with the findings of the previous studies that argue supportive environment positively influences entrepreneurial career preference (Engle, et al, 2011; Falck, et al., 2012). In contrary, the result reported no significant association between external supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference. In addition, the result

demonstrates internal supportive environment impact positively on entrepreneurial skills; therefore, supporting H_3. Similarly, previous studies reported favourable institutional environment promotes entrepreneurial skills (Engle, Dimitriadi, Gavidia, Schlaegel, Delanoe, Alavarado, He, Buame, & Wolff, 2020; Manolova, Eunni, & Gyoshev, 2018; Reynolds 2011).

Furthermore, the result submits that entrepreneurial skills positively influence the students' entrepreneurial career preference; consequently, H_5 is thereby supported. This result is also in line with the several previous studies demonstrating the influence of entrepreneurial skills on entrepreneurial career preference (Abdulai, 2015; Hattab 2014; Hussain & Norashidah, 2015; Iakovleva, Kolvereid & Stephan, 2021; Molaei, Zali, Mobaraki & Farsi, 2014; Rae & Woodier-Harris, 2013).

Accordingly, the result highlighted on the analysis of the indirect relationships as hypothesized in H_6 and H_7 of this study. The finding reveals that entrepreneurial skills can mediate the relationship between institutional supportive environment and the students' entrepreneurial career preference; hence H_6 is hereby established. In addition, the finding also reveals that entrepreneurial skills can significantly mediate the relationship between external supportive environment and the students' entrepreneurial career preference; indicating the acceptance of H_7. Therefore, these suggest that the impact of supportive environment on students' entrepreneurial career preference can be enhanced by providing the students with the necessary entrepreneurial skills as an intervening factor.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to empirically investigate the impact of supportive environment and entrepreneurial skills on students' entrepreneurial career preference. Empirically, the findings reveal a strong positive association was found between internal supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference. These findings are in covenants with previous studies which also show supportive environment positively influences students' entrepreneurial career preference. However, in contrary the findings reveal no significant association between external supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that associations between supportive environment and entrepreneurial skills; and entrepreneurial skills and entrepreneurial career preference were found to be statistically significant. In addition, entrepreneurial skills were statistically found to mediate the association between supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference. Henceforth, the implications for entrepreneurship researchers and educators are to find and adopt teaching methods that boots students' entrepreneurial skills which in turn enhances the students' entrepreneurial career preference.

7. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study provided empirical evidence for the theoretical relationships hypothesized in the research framework. Specifically, the study highlighted the mediating role of entrepreneurial skills on the relationship between supportive environment and entrepreneurial career preference among university students in Nigeria. This provides empirical evidence that internal supportive environment and students' entrepreneurial career preference. This implies that the internal supports obtain in the Nigerian universities positively enhances the students' attitude toward entrepreneurial career preference; thereby increases the level of potential entrepreneurs in the country.

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