Study on the Factors Influencing University Students' Entrepreneurial Intentions

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[Abstract] The purpose of this paper is to study the factors influencing university students' entrepreneurial intentions. By organizing the concept of entrepreneurial intentions and reviewing the literature, it is found that the factors influencing university students' entrepreneurial intentions can be divided into external and internal factors. External factors include the economic environment, institutional environment, and social perception. Economic environment factors comprise the success rate of entrepreneurship, economic conditions, employment stability, etc. Institutional environment factors include entrepreneurial support systems provided by the government or public agencies, and social welfare systems. Additionally, social perception factors refer to the societal support for entrepreneurship. Personal traits factors encompass concerns about entrepreneurial failure, entrepreneurial spirit, autonomy, self-efficacy, need for achievement, and social networks. This paper explores the impact of these factors on university students' entrepreneurial intentions.

[Key words] entrepreneurial intentions; influencing factors; economic environment; institutional environment; social perception; personal traits

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1 Introduction

China's economic development has entered a stage of high-quality growth where the pursuit solely based on GDP growth rate is no longer sufficient. Our economy urgently needs to shift towards productivity-led growth rather than relying predominantly on factor inputs and scale expansion, neglecting the quality and efficiency of growth, as in the past. Chinese enterprises are also transitioning from being "input-driven" to "efficiency-driven" and moving towards an "innovation-driven" model. Consequently, entrepreneurs are evolving from mere "followers" to "innovators". For existing enterprises, continuous investment in research and development for innovative activities is crucial for survival. Furthermore, fostering entrepreneurial activities among risk-taking enterprises serves as a strategy to stimulate national growth vitality.

Due to influences from the economic environment, career preferences, and job market, many college students currently tend to shy away from entrepreneurship and prefer to seek employment in stable sectors such as government agencies, large corporations, and state-owned enterprises. According to the research by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), there exists a U-shaped relationship between entrepreneurial activity and national economic development. The U-shaped curve indicates that during a country's development as a developing nation, limited economic vitality and restricted hiring capacity lead to flourishing entrepreneurial activities, which tend to be survival-oriented. As per capita GDP increases and industries mature, entrepreneurial activities stagnate due to improved hiring capacity of enterprises. However, as the country further develops and the

economic activity increases, a beneficial environment for entrepreneurship emerges, leading to an increase in entrepreneurial ventures, which then lean more towards opportunity—driven entrepreneurship. China is currently transitioning from a developing country to a moderately developed one. According to this research, entrepreneurship is constrained by various factors at this stage. However, to adapt to the knowledge economy era and achieve the goal of becoming a moderately developed country, it's imperative to enhance China's entrepreneurship activity index, making vibrant entrepreneurial activities the core engine of national economic development. To achieve this, it's essential to strengthen research on factors influencing entrepreneurial activities and promote more active entrepreneurial endeavors.

College students, possessing active minds and a certain level of knowledge, should naturally be at the forefront of entrepreneurial activities and occupy a prominent position among entrepreneurs. However, the reality is that due to the various uncertainties associated with entrepreneurship, college students' entrepreneurial intentions are not always strong. This necessitates research into the various factors influencing college students' entrepreneurial intentions to enhance understanding and awareness of these intentions and to identify methods to boost them. This research can provide decision—making foundations for governments or businesses.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the various factors that influence the formation of entrepreneurial intentions among college students, with the aim of identifying strategies to enhance entrepreneurial intentions among them.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Theory of entrepreneurial intentions

Entrepreneurial intention is the primary element that potential entrepreneurs need to possess to embark on the entrepreneurial process. According to Fishbein and Ajzen, intention is a critical variable that determines action. Krueger and Carsrud suggest that entrepreneurial intention implies an attitude of consciously engaging in entrepreneurial activities and marks the beginning of the lengthy entrepreneurial journey.

The decisive factors influencing entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions can be broadly divided into internal personal traits and external environmental factors.

According to existing research, personal trait factors include gender, age, education level, income, family background, social networks, concerns about entrepreneurial failure, and entrepreneurial spirit. If we classify these factors into innate and acquired categories, innate factors include gender, age, and family background, while acquired factors include education level, income level, and social networks.

External environmental factors influencing entrepreneurial intentions can be divided into three categories: economic environment factors, institutional environment factors, and social perception factors. Firstly, economic environment factors include the success rate of entrepreneurship, economic conditions, and employment stability. Institutional environment factors encompass entrepreneurship support systems provided by the government or public institutions, as well as social welfare systems. Additionally, social perception factors involve the degree of societal support for entrepreneurship. Social support for entrepreneurs refers to the mainstream view of ordinary people in society towards entrepreneurs within the social culture.

Reynolds proposed that factors influencing entrepreneurial decisions include economic environmental characteristics, personal life experiences, and individual personality orientations. Gnyawali and Fogel, in their study on entrepreneurship, added government policies, socio – economic conditions, entrepreneurship and management skills, financial support, and non – financial support as explanatory variables, analyzing the

environmental factors influencing entrepreneurial activities.

In Martin's study on the factors influencing entrepreneurial intentions, personal environmental factors are categorized into five factors; social disengagement, psychological and physical characteristics, demonstration effects, family factors, and event predictability. Building on Martin's research, Greenberger and Sexton considered social support as an explanatory variable, suggesting that entrepreneurship is formed through the interaction of individual traits and the environment. Cuervo categorized entrepreneurial environmental factors into macroeconomic environment, industry characteristics, financial environment, geographical environment and legal system, education and technology system, culture, and values. Smeltzer and Fann, as well as Naffziger et al., argued that factors such as education levels, social entrepreneurial support networks, societal attitudes towards entrepreneurial intentions. However, Luthje and Frank's research indicates that entrepreneurship is not related to individuals' attitudes towards it but rather to the external environment. The more negative the external environment's attitude towards entrepreneurship is, the lower the entrepreneurship rate will be.

Overall, the factors influencing entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions can be broadly categorized into internal factors and external environmental factors. Internal factors refer to personal traits, while external environmental factors encompass the success rate of entrepreneurship. The latter can be seen as a comprehensive reflection of the economic environment, institutional environment, and social perception of entrepreneurship, including economic conditions, social welfare systems, entrepreneurship support systems, societal support for entrepreneurship, employment conditions, etc. Together, they collectively influence entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions.

2.2 Objective entrepreneurial environment and entrepreneurial intentions

In this study, the external environmental factors influencing entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions are defined as the objective entrepreneurial environment, primarily considering variables such as the success rate of entrepreneurship, economic conditions, societal support for entrepreneurship, employment stability, entrepreneurship support systems, etc.

2.2.1 Success rate of entrepreneurship

Due to various constraints, the success rate of entrepreneurship among college students is not high, which serves as a hindrance to entrepreneurial endeavors. According to the "2016 College Students Entrepreneurship Report in China" released by Renmin University of China, nearly 90% of Chinese college students express an intention to start their own businesses, with 20% showing a strong inclination towards entrepreneurship. However, in 2016, only around 3% of college graduates in China pursued independent entrepreneurship upon graduation. Among these student entrepreneurs, the success rate is only about 2%, significantly lower than the success rates of typical businesses and those in Western countries. Analysis suggests that the main reasons for failure include lack of understanding of policies and measures, lack of funds, and lack of guidance.

For college student entrepreneurs, the low success rate of entrepreneurship can lead to concerns about entrepreneurial failure, thereby weakening their entrepreneurial intentions. Later, we will discuss this factor of concerns about entrepreneurial failure.

2.2.2 Economic conditions

Economic conditions can influence entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions. Knight suggests that when there is high unemployment and individuals struggle to find new jobs, entrepreneurship tends to increase. Survey results from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) indicate that countries with higher early-stage entrepreneurial

activity index (entrepreneurship less than 3 years and 6 months) tend to have higher unemployment rates, demonstrating that entrepreneurship is often chosen as an alternative to traditional employment. Conversely, some scholars argue that economic downturns can have a negative impact on individuals' entrepreneurial intentions. As economic conditions worsen or remain in a state of low growth, leading to deteriorating employment situations and rising unemployment rates, there is a significant increase in non-voluntary necessity-driven entrepreneurship. In such situations, due to economic downturns, there is a possibility of creating an entrepreneurial ecosystem where the more entrepreneurship is, the more failures occur.

2.2.3 Social welfare system

Currently, there is almost no research on the impact of the social welfare system on entrepreneurial intentions. However, it can be inferred that if the social welfare system is lacking, entrepreneurs may be concerned about facing a series of problems in the future that can only be resolved through the social welfare system. Some benefits are only available through employment, and without employment, individuals may not be able to address these issues on their own. Therefore, for practical reasons, even if they have entrepreneurial intentions, entrepreneurs may choose to abandon entrepreneurship. In other words, an environment with an imperfect social welfare system will significantly weaken the entrepreneurial intentions of college student entrepreneurs.

2.2.4 Social support for entrepreneurship

One of the external environmental factors influencing entrepreneurship is the level of social support for entrepreneurs. The public's recognition of the contribution of entrepreneurship to the national economy and their friendly attitude towards entrepreneurs can positively influence the general attitude towards entrepreneurship. This, in turn, affects entrepreneurs' considerations in actively choosing entrepreneurship and regarding it as a personal experience to enrich their own lives.

Gnyawali and Fogel argue that favorable societal perceptions of entrepreneurs create a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship, prompting them to choose entrepreneurship as a personal experience. Conversely, negative societal attitudes towards entrepreneurs can hinder entrepreneurship.

2.2.5 Employment stability

Employment stability is primarily assessed from two perspectives; changes in employment conditions based on economic conditions and the increasing occupational instability brought about by the rise in flexible employment positions, meaning many job positions nowadays are unstable. If economic conditions deteriorate and employment rates worsen, the entrepreneurship rate will reflexively increase. Lee used macro time-series data to validate a motivation – based entrepreneurial decision – making model, which showed a negative relationship between entrepreneurship rate and employment rate. For those experiencing low wages and a modest standard of living due to job instability, the primary motivation for entrepreneurial activities is to meet more basic needs, such as economic requirements. Furthermore, when the proportion of temporary (e. g., part-time) and informal (labor dispatch, day labor, special labor) forms of flexible employment increases, job seekers are likely to opt for entrepreneurship rather than traditional employment. For college graduates, if they face difficulty in finding employment and can only secure temporary or informal positions, they are likely to choose entrepreneurship. However, this type of entrepreneurship is typically survival-oriented rather than opportunity-driven.

2.2.6 Entrepreneurship support system

Entrepreneurship education and government support systems for entrepreneurs are also important factors influencing entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions. Cho's research suggests that entrepreneurs' temperament is innate, and if not reinforced postnatally, entrepreneurship education would be meaningless. However, Han & Lee

argue that entrepreneurship education enhances the entrepreneurial confidence of educated learners. Clark et al. also found that entrepreneurship education fosters the entrepreneurial intentions of university students. In other words, entrepreneurship education can enhance the likelihood of entrepreneurs engaging in entrepreneurial activities and achieving entrepreneurial success.

2.3 Concerns about entrepreneurial failure and entrepreneurial intentions

Entrepreneurs face uncertainty and risk before embarking on entrepreneurship. Therefore, concerns about entrepreneurial failure can weaken entrepreneurial intentions during the formation process and continue to undermine confidence even after entrepreneurship, diminishing the essence of entrepreneurship—the tendency for risk – taking. Sung found that while entrepreneurial intentions may increase after completing entrepreneurship education, they may not continue to rise when faced with practical difficulties of entrepreneurship due to factors such as psychological burdens.

According to Boyd and Gumpert, a study focusing on small and medium-sized enterprise CEOs revealed that approximately 55% to 65% of entrepreneurs experience severe symptoms such as insomnia, back pain, indigestion, and headaches. Additionally, entrepreneurs undergo various forms of anguish including feelings of loneliness, being overwhelmed by work, interpersonal relationship challenges, and excessive desire for achievement, leading to significant stress. Chung suggests that experiences of failure in entrepreneurship are associated with feelings of embarrassment, and closely linked to career aspirations and job pressure. Particularly in authoritarian societies where entrepreneurial risks are higher, individuals may be less inclined to start a business; when there is fear of failure, even small entrepreneurial endeavors may not be attempted.

Shapero and Sokol argue that the success or failure of a business largely depends on the entrepreneur's willingness to take risks, which varies among individuals based on how they cope with various pressures brought about by entrepreneurship. Redding suggests that the most significant factor in entrepreneurial decisions is the prestige associated with success and the shame associated with business failure. Ha proposes that the cost of implementing systematic and professional entrepreneurship education is much lower than the cost of reviving a failed business, thereby reducing the social costs of business failure and mitigating the aftermath of entrepreneurial failure.

According to a survey conducted by the global accounting firm Ernst & Young focusing on young entrepreneurs aged 18 to 40 in G20 countries, regarding whether they perceive entrepreneurial failure as a life experience and a social learning opportunity, subjective concerns varied among countries. Asian nations, particularly those with a strong emphasis on external authority and dignity, generally shared similar concerns about entrepreneurial failure. This can be attributed to cultural factors unique to Asia, especially East Asian Confucian societies. In terms of objective concerns, for instance in the United States, there is a societal atmosphere that recognizes entrepreneurial failure as a valuable asset for accumulating experience and progressing towards success. Conversely, in China, banks often require entrepreneurs to provide collateral, and society tends to view failure in entrepreneurship as permanent, thus potential entrepreneurs express anxiety about failure. The concern among entrepreneurs about entrepreneurial failure can be viewed from two perspectives; subjective concerns of entrepreneurs themselves and objective concerns about society's failure to provide another chance for failed entrepreneurs to succeed, reflecting concerns about the social and economic environment.

2.4 Personal traits

The primary factor in personal traits is entrepreneurship. The term "entrepreneurship" is difficult to define as a concept, but it has been consistently used in theoretical and empirical research. This concept can generally be divided into two main categories: one focuses on the individual's character itself, which is a social and psychological perspective; the other combines these personal traits but emphasizes the study of individual behavior to compensate for the limitations of individual psychological and social perspectives.

This study suggests that these two perspectives should be integrated to form a concept of entrepreneurship that has modern significance and embodies both the thoughts and behavioral characteristics of entrepreneurs. The main components of entrepreneurship are "innovation", "risk-taking propensity", and "proactiveness".

Firstly, a significant influence on the meaning of innovation comes from Schumpeter, who emphasized "creative destruction" and considered entrepreneurial "creative innovation" to play the most crucial role in the entrepreneurial process. Innovation is a process of using new ideas to capture market opportunities, including activities such as product development, market research, and promotional activities, actively engaging in business operations. It involves not only creative and original thinking but also turning these thoughts into action.

Secondly, the willingness to take risks as an element of entrepreneurial spirit is defined as the willingness to challenge even when success is not certain, the willingness to take risks to create opportunities, and the ability to seize opportunities. This includes not only the willingness and ability to embrace uncertainty and challenges but also the execution of business activities and striving for success through practical actions. The adventurous spirit in entrepreneurship prefers to take high risks, and calculate risks while seeking opportunities. This is referred to as "risk-taking propensity".

Empirical research indicates that entrepreneurs have a stronger awareness of risk – taking compared to managers, and this awareness of risk – taking positively influences entrepreneurial success. Moreover, this awareness of risk – taking is also related to entrepreneurial intention.

Finally, proactiveness is defined as the efforts of entrepreneurs to courageously take risks, face challenges, and seize opportunities, anticipating success or failure, predicting opportunities or changes, and taking corresponding actions. It involves surpassing current resources and creating new opportunities. Proactive entrepreneurs, mostly future—oriented, continuously adapt to achieve their set goals, tending to be more proactive and aggressive in responding to changes compared to others. Some studies suggest that proactiveness is a motivating factor for entrepreneurs and has a positive impact on entrepreneurial outcomes.

The second element of personal traits is autonomy. Autonomy is a primary constituent of Self-Determination Theory, which includes the belief and ability of entrepreneurs to be the decision-makers in entrepreneurship-related decisions, as well as the activities they undertake in their entrepreneurial endeavors. Many studies consider autonomy as a representative and core personal characteristic of individuals considering entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs who possess autonomy both psychologically and behaviorally demonstrate better utilization of their abilities in actual business operations and consequently have a significant impact on entrepreneurial outcomes.

Autonomy, literally meaning "the desire to work according to one's own will, rather than the will of others", includes the freedom and independence from constraints in work, which can generate innovative business outcomes. Particularly from the perspective of entrepreneurial types, university student entrepreneurs who prefer a strong sense of autonomy in their work are more likely to choose entrepreneurship.

The third element of personal traits is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the belief that one can successfully complete a task. It means "believing in one's ability to control and execute actions correctly in order to achieve goals", which is a judgment of one's own capabilities.

Self-efficacy is the belief of entrepreneurs that they can achieve satisfactory outcomes, thus it can be seen as a form of "confidence". Youn considers "confidence" as self-belief in specific business-related execution

capabilities. Wilson et al. suggest that the core of entrepreneurial confidence lies in the ability to answer questions such as "how to succeed in entrepreneurship". Confidence is influenced by factors such as successful experiences, richer experiences, and a healthy state of mind or body, which prompt entrepreneurs to take proactive actions that ultimately lead to success. Chen et al. argue that confidence is an important psychological characteristic for successful entrepreneurship, while Krueger & Brazeal propose that entrepreneurs with stronger confidence have stronger self – beliefs in handling significant decisions, highlighting the important impact of confidence on entrepreneurial decision–making and actions.

Additionally, Han conducted research on failure cases caused by career risks, identifying seven traps: "choice trap", "market trap", "management trap", "attitude trap", "relationship trap", and "misfortune trap". Therefore, considering the various reasons for failure that entrepreneurs may encounter in the actual entrepreneurial process, it is not appropriate to treat entrepreneurial confidence as a single variable. Instead, it should be divided into several different explanatory variables, namely confidence in industry selection, confidence in marketing capabilities, confidence in fundraising abilities, and confidence in operational capabilities. This approach appears to be more specific and clear—cut.

The fourth constituent factor of personal traits is the need for achievement. Need for achievement refers to the desire to perform tasks quickly and accurately. Individuals with a strong need for achievement can be seen as having a strong desire for success, a high willingness to take risks, and a willingness to take responsibility for and fully participate in decision—making processes. People with a strong need for achievement consciously set higher goals, creating motivation to increase the probability of goal attainment, and actually achieve higher levels of goal attainment. Research suggests that the need for achievement is associated with entrepreneurial outcomes. Krueger and Lee suggest a close relationship between the need for achievement and entrepreneurship. Johnson found in 20 out of 23 empirical studies that there is a positive relationship between the need for achievement and entrepreneurial behavior. Additionally, research has shown that the need for achievement has an impact on entrepreneurship.

2.5 Social network

In the field of entrepreneurial studies, social networks are considered significant factors. Researchers discuss networks using various concepts, which can be categorized as follows. Firstly, some scholars refer the general public terms "connections" as "networks" that the social sciences aim to express. In Laumann, et al. 's research, the overall connections between individuals are defined as the aggregate formed by relationships in society and termed as networks. Meanwhile, Brass, et al. 's study defines networks as all interconnected individuals or organizations within such relationships. Particularly, Burt considers resources gained from individual or organizational relationships as part of networks. Some studies suggest that the size, scope, and strength of networks affect the acquisition of information, business outcomes, and innovative actions. Additionally, network density influences organizational commitment and intentions to leave.

This study suggests that the influence of networks on entrepreneurship among college students can be examined from two perspectives. Firstly, the diversity of networks impacts the flow of information. The concept of diversity includes the size of the network, indicating the number of various social networks individuals belong to, as well as the range of the network. Networks are crucial for both individuals and organizations, as research indicates that when there are many connections within an organization, both individuals and the organization can acquire information and resources through networks, leading to a competitive advantage. Additionally, besides network diversity, scholars have also studied network density and strength. Network depth includes the concept of density, which refers to the degree of mutual understanding within each relationship, and strength, which refers to the

frequency and depth of communication between individuals or organizations. Some studies suggest that the stronger the social network ties, the higher the density will be, meaning the more familiar and frequent interactions with people knowledgeable about a specific field, the higher the level of commitment to work and the ability to acquire information. Therefore, it can be argued that college student entrepreneurs with more diverse and deeper networks are better equipped to acquire information and resources, enhancing their entrepreneurial confidence and, consequently, influencing their entrepreneurial intentions.

3 Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors influencing entrepreneurial intentions from both external and internal perspectives. Existing research on the factors influencing entrepreneurial intentions is not comprehensive, whether it focuses on the personal characteristics of entrepreneurs or the external environmental factors they face. Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively understand the factors influencing entrepreneurial intentions from both the objective entrepreneurial environment and the psychological traits of entrepreneurs.

The summary of the research findings is as follows. Firstly, external environmental factors influencing entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions can be categorized into three types; economic environment factors, institutional environment factors, and social perception factors. Economic environment factors include the success rate of entrepreneurship, economic conditions, and employment stability. A high success rate environment positively influences college students' entrepreneurial intentions. Economic conditions have two effects; in times of economic downturn with high unemployment rates, entrepreneurial rates tend to rise, but this type of entrepreneurship is survival – oriented. Conversely, in prosperous economic environments where conditions for successful entrepreneurship are abundant, the entrepreneurial rate also increases, representing opportunity—driven entrepreneurship aimed at personal achievement. Institutional environment factors mainly consist of government or public support systems for entrepreneurship and social welfare systems. Well—established entrepreneurial support systems encourage entrepreneurship, while comprehensive social welfare systems reduce concerns related to entrepreneurship and consequently affect entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial intentions. Additionally, social perception factors refer to the degree of societal support for entrepreneurship, reflecting the mainstream societal perception of entrepreneurs within the cultural context. Positive societal attitudes towards entrepreneurial intentions.

Secondly, this study also examines the impact of concerns about entrepreneurial failure on entrepreneurial intentions. Due to inadequate societal understanding of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs, our entrepreneurs harbor greater concerns about the possibility of entrepreneurial failure. These concerns act as a deterrent to entrepreneurial intentions.

Thirdly, entrepreneurial intentions among college student entrepreneurs are also influenced by personal traits. The first aspect of personal traits is entrepreneurial spirit, which includes innovativeness, a willingness to take risks, and ambition. These factors all positively impact entrepreneurial intentions. The second aspect is autonomy. When an entrepreneur emphasizes self-reliance and prefers to utilize their abilities according to their own will, they may be inclined towards entrepreneurship. The third aspect is self-efficacy, which can be viewed as confidence. Since entrepreneurs face various challenges in entrepreneurial practice, which may lead to failure, having confidence in addressing these diverse and complex issues is manifested in different aspects such as confidence in industry selection, marketing abilities, fundraising capabilities, and operational skills. The fourth aspect of personal traits is the need for achievement. Individuals with a strong need for achievement are more likely to choose

entrepreneurship.

Finally, this study also examines the influence of personal social networks on entrepreneurial intentions. The number and scope of an individual's social networks affect the quantity of information and social resources available for entrepreneurship. Moreover, the greater the density and strength of social networks are, the deeper the entrepreneur's commitment and understanding of the industry and customers will be, leading to stronger information acquisition capabilities. All of these contribute to entrepreneurs fostering a stronger sense of self-efficacy, thereby influencing entrepreneurial intentions.

4 Limitations of the study and future research directions

Finally, limitations of this study and future research directions are outlined below. Firstly, this study only theoretically explores the internal and external factors influencing entrepreneurship among college students without obtaining primary data through surveys. Future research should focus on using college students as samples to investigate the specific effects of the factors summarized in this study on their entrepreneurial intentions. Secondly, this study only identifies a few limited factors influencing college students' entrepreneurial intentions. It can be inferred that these factors may not be sufficient to fully explain college students' entrepreneurial intentions. In future research, besides the variables used in this study, other factors should also be considered. For example, expanding the components of personal traits used in this study or introducing other factors such as political, economic, social, and cultural factors for further investigation. Thirdly, each country has its unique economic and cultural environment. Future research could consider conducting cross—national comparative studies to enhance understanding of and insight into the entrepreneurial intentions of college students in different countries. Fourthly, in future research, it is not only important to study the influencing factors of college students' entrepreneurial intentions but also to investigate the factors influencing their choice of entrepreneurial methods, providing a theoretical basis for government and business decision—making.