International Journal of Business and Technopreneurship
Volume 15, No 3, October 2025 [333-348]

Drivers of Social Entrepreneurial Intention: Evidence from a Malaysian Higher Education Context

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Received 21st August 2025, Revised 2nd September 2025, Accepted 29th September 2025

ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship has gained increasing prominence in addressing complex societal challenges through innovative, sustainable solutions. However, in Malaysia, the development of the social entrepreneurship sector remains limited, particularly among university students who are often viewed as potential agents of social change. This study examines the psychological and social factors that influence students' intention to engage in social entrepreneurship, focusing on four key antecedents: empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Entrepreneurial Event Model (EEM), the research employs a quantitative approach using a structured questionnaire distributed among Malaysian university students. Data were collected from 193 respondents and analysed using SPSS, applying correlation and regression techniques to test the proposed relationships. The findings demonstrate that all four constructs significantly influence Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI), with self-efficacy emerging as the most prominent predictor. The study contributes theoretically by validating an integrated cognitive–affective model of SEI and expanding its applicability within the context of Malaysian higher education. Practically, the results provide valuable insights for educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers to design targeted interventions that enhance students' readiness to pursue social entrepreneurship. By identifying key motivational drivers, this study supports efforts to cultivate a new generation of socially conscious entrepreneurs equipped to drive inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: Empathy, Moral Obligation, Self-efficacy, Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI), Social Support

1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is widely regarded as a powerful driver of economic growth, innovation, job creation, and social development (Zulkifle & Aziz, 2023). In the face of economic uncertainty and rising youth unemployment, entrepreneurial ventures, particularly Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), have gained prominence for their capacity to generate income, expand market opportunities, and build community resilience (Hassan et al., 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2025). In response, many governments, especially in emerging economies such as Malaysia, have elevated entrepreneurship to a national priority (Hamzah et al., 2025). Malaysia has taken proactive steps to develop a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem through long-term strategies such as the *Dasar Keusahawanan Nasional* (*DKN*) 2030 (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2025), which promotes innovation, inclusivity, and sustainable economic transformation across all sectors of society (Othman et al., 2021).

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Within this evolving landscape, social entrepreneurship has gained increasing attention as an alternative model that blends business principles with the pursuit of social impact (Zakaria et al., 2021). Social entrepreneurs aim not only to generate financial returns but also to address pressing societal issues such as poverty, inequality, education gaps, and environmental degradation (Adnan et al., 2018; Rahman et al., 2016; Zulkifle & Aziz, 2023). Unlike conventional enterprises, social enterprises are mission-driven, focusing on creating lasting social value while ensuring long-term viability, making them an essential component of Malaysia's inclusive development agenda (Zakaria et al., 2021).

Despite strategic efforts and policy interventions, the growth of the social entrepreneurship sector in Malaysia has been slower than expected. Initiatives such as the Malaysian Social Enterprise Blueprint and government-backed funding through the Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC) were introduced to boost social enterprise development (Rashid et al., 2018; Zulkifle & Aziz, 2023). However, the goal of establishing 1,000 social enterprises by 2018 was not met, with only 414 enterprises registered by the third quarter of 2022 (Zulkifle & Aziz, 2023). The national rate of social entrepreneurship remains below 2%, far lower than in developed countries like the United States, where social entrepreneurial activity is more active (Mohd et al., 2023).

While students are a key demographic for cultivating future social entrepreneurs, empirical evidence shows they have only low to moderate intentions to engage in social entrepreneurship (Rahman et al., 2016). Low youth volunteerism, which is positively linked to social entrepreneurship intention, worsens the situation (Zakaria et al., 2021). Additionally, the absence of a clear legal framework, limited exposure to practical social enterprise models, and inadequate institutional support contribute to students' limited engagement with the sector (Jabar & Asung, 2016; Rashid et al., 2018). Although students are often seen as future social innovators, their current level of involvement remains minimal, underscoring the need for further research into the factors that shape their social entrepreneurship intentions.

This study aims to examine the underlying factors that influence students' intention to engage in social entrepreneurship, addressing noticeable gaps in current research. Specifically, it examines how psychological constructs, such as empathy, moral obligation, and self-efficacy, along with social factors like social support, influence students' intentions to engage in social entrepreneurship. By addressing these objectives, this study contributes valuable empirical insights into the determinants of Social Entrepreneurship Intention (SEI) among students in higher education. The findings are expected to support educational institutions, policymakers, and social enterprise stakeholders in designing more effective strategies, academic programmes, and support systems that can cultivate a new generation of socially responsible entrepreneurs committed to addressing societal challenges in a sustainable and impactful manner.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine the relationship between empathy and social entrepreneurial intention.
- To identify the relationship between moral obligation and social entrepreneurial intention.
- To determine the relationship between self-efficacy and social entrepreneurial intention.
- To assess the relationship between social support and social entrepreneurial intention.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Underpinning Theory

This study is grounded in two extensively validated theoretical frameworks: the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Entrepreneurial Event Model (EEM), both of which have been widely applied to examine entrepreneurial intentions across multiple domains. TPB, proposed by Ajzen (1991), posits that behavioural intention, the most immediate antecedent to action, is shaped by three components: attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Complementing this, EEM, developed by Shapero and Sokol (1982), emphasises the importance of perceived desirability, perceived feasibility, and a propensity to act in shaping entrepreneurial intention. Together, these models provide a complementary perspective that accounts for both internal cognition and external influences in the formation of entrepreneurial intention.

Bridging these two theoretical traditions, Mair and Noboa (2006) proposed a seminal framework that adapts TPB and EEM to the social entrepreneurship context. Their model identifies four key constructs influencing the intention to start a social enterprise: empathy, moral judgment, self-efficacy, and social support. These variables are categorised into two dimensions: 1) cognitive-emotional factors, empathy and moral judgment, which influence perceived desirability; and 2) perceived feasibility factors, self-efficacy and social support, which influence individuals' beliefs about their capacity to launch a social enterprise (Mair & Noboa, 2006). Both TPB and EEM have been widely applied in diverse research contexts, including technology adoption (Fink et al., 2022), consumer behaviour (Timpanaro & Cascone, 2022), supply chain management (Kamble et al., 2018), and sustainability (Seong et al., 2021; Cahigas et al., 2022). Their robust explanatory power has also been evidenced in studies of entrepreneurship in family businesses (Singh et al., 2021), small firms (Sandhu & El-Gohary, 2022) and innovation (Kim et al., 2019). In the field of social entrepreneurship, where intention formation is often influenced by ethical values, self-belief, and societal support, the integration of TPB and EEM is particularly apt (Tiwari et al., 2017; Rey-Martí et al., 2016).

Building upon Mair and Noboa's (2006) foundational model, Hockerts (2015) proposed a revised framework, incorporating empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support as key predictors of SEI. Empirical studies have supported these links. For example, exposure to societal challenges has been shown to increase empathy and boost SEI (Bacq & Alt, 2018); moral obligation acts as an ethical driver that encourages socially responsible actions (Sousa-Filho et al., 2020); self-efficacy is linked to students' confidence in creating and maintaining social ventures (Akhter, 2022); and social support consistently predicts the perceived feasibility of launching social initiatives (Hockerts, 2017). In line with these theoretical advances, the present study examines how these four factors (empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support) influence SEI among university students in the Malaysian context.

3.2 Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI)

Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI) is defined as an individual's deliberate mindset to establish ventures that address social or environmental issues while maintaining financial sustainability (Hockerts, 2017). SEI is increasingly recognised as a distinct and important form of entrepreneurial intention that blends prosocial motivation with business acumen (Ip et al., 2021; Bacq & Alt, 2018). According to Sousa-Filho et al. (2020), SEI is influenced by both internal factors, such as empathy and moral obligation, and external factors, such as social support. Bacq and Alt (2018) further emphasised that exposure to social problems enhances empathy and strengthens the intention to engage in social entrepreneurship. Similarly, Akhter (2022) reported that students with higher self-efficacy were more confident in their capacity to initiate and sustain

social ventures. In the Malaysian context, Zulkifle and Aziz (2023) highlighted that government policies and educational initiatives have begun to foster youth engagement in social enterprise development.

Despite growing awareness, SEI among students in emerging economies remains moderate due to structural and psychological barriers (Rahman et al., 2016). According to Jabar and Asung (2016), limited awareness, low peer influence, and inadequate programme support reduce the likelihood of students forming strong SEI. Rahman et al. (2016) found that although Malaysian university students expressed interest in social impact activities, their level of intention to start social enterprises was relatively low. Ayob et al. (2014) suggested that perceived desirability and feasibility, shaped by emotional and cognitive antecedents such as empathy and self-efficacy, significantly influence SEI among undergraduates. Furthermore, Ip et al. (2017) proposed that moral obligation provides a more comprehensive understanding of ethical motivation than moral judgment, particularly in predicting socially driven entrepreneurial behaviour. Thus, the formation of SEI depends not only on individual traits but also on institutional support and perceived opportunity structures, especially within the higher education environment (Sousa-Filho et al., 2020; Bacq & Alt, 2018).

3.3 Empathy

Empathy is broadly defined as the ability to understand and share another person's emotional state, enabling individuals to resonate with the experiences of others (Decety & Jackson, 2004). It reflects a cognitive and emotional capacity to perceive and respond to others' feelings, thereby playing a critical role in shaping socially oriented behaviours (Younis et al., 2020; Saban & Kirby, 2019). Empathy has been consistently described as an essential social competence, allowing individuals to engage in meaningful, pro-social actions (Laghi et al., 2019; Kim & Han, 2018). Within the context of social entrepreneurship, Mair and Noboa (2006) argue that empathy forms one of the primary psychological antecedents influencing the desirability of launching social ventures. Prior research highlights empathy as a key distinguishing trait of social entrepreneurs, differentiating them from traditional profit-oriented entrepreneurs (Lingappa et al., 2022). Bacq and Alt (2018) assert that prosocial motivation, underpinned by empathy, is crucial in understanding why individuals engage in social entrepreneurship beyond self-interest. Similarly, Rambe and Ndofirepi (2019) identified empathy, along with self-efficacy and social support, as significant predictors of SEI among university students in Zimbabwe. Zulfiqar et al. (2019) further found that both formal and informal education can foster empathetic dispositions, which subsequently influence youths' intentions toward social entrepreneurship. Supporting this, Younis et al. (2020) demonstrated that empathy not only enhances social self-efficacy but also directly contributes to stronger social entrepreneurship intentions. Based on these insights, the current study proposes the following hypothesis:

H_1: There is a significant relationship between empathy and social entrepreneurial intention.

3.4 Moral Obligation

Moral obligation refers to an individual's perceived ethical duty to act in ways that benefit others, particularly those who are socially marginalised (Bryant, 2009). Within the TPB, moral obligation aligns with subjective norms, which represent social expectations and perceived social pressure to perform certain behaviours (Forster & Grichnik, 2013). Adapting Mair and Noboa's (2006) model, Hockerts (2017) replaced moral judgment with moral obligation, arguing that moral obligation better captures the internalised sense of responsibility that compels individuals toward action, rather than merely explaining the reasoning behind ethical evaluations (Ip et al., 2017). Several studies have validated moral obligation as a significant antecedent of SEI, showing that it enhances the predictive power of TPB-based models (Tiwari et al., 2017; Sousa-Filho et al., 2020). Haines et al. (2007) defined moral obligation as an intermediary process that bridges

moral judgment and moral intention, influencing one's commitment to ethical entrepreneurial behaviour. Furthermore, moral obligation has been shown to mediate the relationship between exposure to social issues and the formation of SEI (Sousa-Filho et al., 2020). De Groot and Steg (2009) demonstrated that strengthening moral awareness leads to increased prosocial behaviour, which aligns with the objectives of social entrepreneurs aiming to generate positive societal impact (Stephan et al., 2014). Given that moral obligation reflects internalised social norms and ethical values, it is posited to play a significant role in the development of SEI. Therefore, the current study hypothesises the following:

H_2: There is a significant relationship between moral obligation and social entrepreneurial intention.

3.5 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to successfully perform specific tasks or actions (Al Doghan & Piaralal, 2024). In the context of entrepreneurship, self-efficacy reflects confidence in one's ability to navigate challenges and accomplish entrepreneurial goals (Wilde & Hsu, 2019; Samydevan et al., 2020). Self-efficacy influences how individuals think, feel, and behave, with high SE fostering persistence and resilience, while low self-efficacy is associated with negative emotional states such as helplessness, anxiety, and diminished motivation (Schwartz, 2013). Within entrepreneurial contexts, self-efficacy has been shown to predict a range of outcomes, including perceived feasibility, opportunity recognition, and entrepreneurial intention (Piperopoulos & Dimov, 2015). Specifically, social entrepreneurship often involves navigating complex societal issues, resource limitations, and systemic barriers, making a strong sense of self-efficacy essential for initiating and sustaining social ventures (Wilton & Venter, 2016). Research by Mair and Marti (2006) suggests that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to view the creation of social enterprises as feasible, thereby enhancing their SEI. Further empirical evidence confirms that self-efficacy significantly correlates with perceived behavioural control and intention formation in social entrepreneurship contexts (Ernst, 2011; Hockerts, 2015). Moreover, Liñán et al. (2011) argue that investigating cognitive antecedents like self-efficacy provides valuable insights into how individuals form entrepreneurial goals. In sum, self-efficacy is a critical motivational factor that strengthens belief in one's ability to launch and manage a social enterprise, particularly in challenging or resource-scarce environments. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_3: There is a significant relationship between self-efficacy and social entrepreneurial intention.

3.6 Social Support

Social support refers to the perceived availability of assistance, emotional, informational, financial, or instrumental, from one's social network, including peers, family, institutions, and the broader community (Chan, 2015). In the context of entrepreneurship, social support reflects the resources individuals expect to receive to help them pursue entrepreneurial objectives (Hockerts, 2017). Research shows that social support not only enhances perceived behavioural control but also motivates moral engagement with underserved communities, thereby strengthening SEI (Yousaf & Ghayas, 2015; Ip et al., 2021). In developing economies, social support is particularly crucial due to the limited institutional and financial infrastructure supporting entrepreneurial ventures (Desa & Basu, 2013). Prior studies have confirmed that social support significantly correlates with SEI, especially among university students who rely on family encouragement, peer networks, and institutional support to engage in socially driven entrepreneurial activities (Sousa-Filho et al., 2020). Despite its importance, the influence of social support has been understudied during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when such support becomes even more vital (Alfarone & Merlone, 2022). Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_4: There is a significant relationship between social support and social entrepreneurial intention.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study proposes a conceptual framework to examine the influence of four psychological and social antecedents, empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support, on SEI among university students in Malaysia. The framework reflects the hypothesised relationships between these antecedents and SEI and serves as a basis for testing the proposed model within the Malaysian setting. As illustrated in Figure 1, this framework has been adapted from Hockerts' (2015) original model to align with the scope and objectives of the present study.

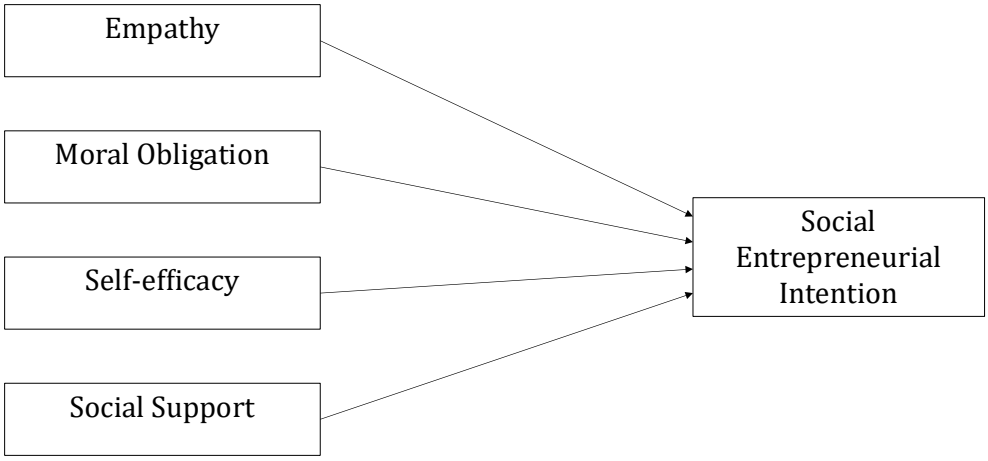

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine the influence of empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support on SEI. To achieve this objective, this study employed a quantitative, descriptive research design grounded in the positivist paradigm, which emphasises objectivity, measurement, and hypothesis testing based on observable data. The population for this study comprises 193 active Open University Malaysia (OUM) students enrolled in various programmes. OUM students were selected because of a diverse student body, including adult learners and working professionals from various backgrounds and age groups, many of whom are actively engaged in community development or socially oriented work. Thus, make them a relevant and practical group for investigating social entrepreneurship intentions. Due to practical constraints and the need for accessible respondents, a non-probability convenience sampling method was employed. This approach is widely accepted for academic research with a limited duration and offers efficient access to relevant respondents (Fleetwood, 2018).

A structured, self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection and distributed electronically through Google Forms. The instrument was developed using validated items: independent variables (empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support) were adapted from Hockerts (2015), and the dependent variable (SEI) from Liñán and Chen (2009) (Table 1). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) to ensure consistency, simplicity, and ease of analysis. The questionnaire link was shared via students' official OUM email addresses with assistance from university

management. Participation was voluntary, and the data were collected anonymously to maintain respondent confidentiality. This study adhered to ethical research standards by ensuring informed consent, protecting respondent anonymity, and maintaining the confidentiality of all data collected.

Table 1 Measurement Items

Construct/ Source	Measurement Items
Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI)/ (Liñán & Chen, 2009)	SEI1: I am ready to do anything to be a social entrepreneur. SEI2: My professional goal is to become a social entrepreneur. SEI3: I will make every effort to start and run my own social enterprise. SEI4: I am determined to create a social enterprise in the future. SEI5: I have a strong intention to start a social enterprise someday.
Empathy (EM)/ (Hockerts, 2015)	EM1: When thinking about socially disadvantaged people, I try to put myself in their shoes. EM2: I do not experience much emotion when thinking about socially excluded people. EM3: Seeing socially disadvantaged people triggers an emotional response in me. EM4: I feel compassion for socially marginalised people.
Moral Obligation (MO)/ (Hockerts, 2015)	MO1: It is an ethical responsibility to help people less fortunate than ourselves. MO2: We are morally obliged to help socially disadvantaged people. MO3: Social justice requires that we help those who are less fortunate than ourselves. MO4: It is one of the principles of our society that we should help socially disadvantaged people. MO5: I would be actively supported with advice/counselling or networking efforts by Institutions.
Self-Efficacy (SE)/ (Hockerts, 2015)	SE1: I am convinced that I personally can make a contribution to address societal challenges if I put my mind to it. SE2: I could figure out a way to help solve the problems that society faces. SE3: Solving societal problems is something each of us can contribute to.
Social Support (SS)/ (Hockerts, 2015)	SS1: It is possible to attract investors for an organisation that wants to solve social problems. SS2: People would support me if I wanted to start an organisation to help socially marginalised people. SS3: If I planned to address a significant societal problem, people would support me. SS4: I do not expect that I would receive much support if I were to start a social enterprise.

5.1 Respondent Demographic Profile

Out of 193 OUM students who responded to the online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, 181 valid responses were retained after data quality screening. Descriptive statistics reveal that 43.6% of respondents were aged between 25 and 35, followed by 27.6% aged 36–45, 15.5% aged below 25, and 13.3% aged above 45. The gender distribution was skewed toward females, who comprised 65.2% of the sample, while males accounted for 34.8%. Ethnically, Malays constituted the largest group (42.5%), followed by others (24.3%), Indians (17.7%), and Chinese (15.5%). With regard to religion, respondents identified as Muslim (45.9%), Christian (24.3%), Hindu (16.0%), Buddhist (10.5%), and others (3.3%). All participants were Malaysian citizens. In terms of educational attainment, 33.1% held a bachelor's degree, 25.4% a diploma, 22.1% a master's degree, 10.5% completed secondary education (SPM), 5.0% held a Ph.D, and 3.9% had completed STPM. Concerning academic progression at OUM, 43.1% were in their first year, 32.6% in their final year, 18.8% in their second year, and 5.5% in their third year. Overall, the sample reflects a diverse cross-section of university students in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education, and academic standing, providing a suitable basis for examining SEI.

6. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data collected were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. A combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques was employed to evaluate the dataset. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise the demographic characteristics and key variables. Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis was conducted for all constructs to assess the internal consistency of the measurement instruments. Pearson correlation analysis was then used to examine the strength and direction of the relationships among the variables. In addition, one-way ANOVA was performed to evaluate the statistical significance of these relationships by analysing variance through F-statistics. Together, these analyses provided a comprehensive assessment of the factors influencing SEI.

6.1 Reliability Analysis

Table 2 presents the Cronbach's alpha values for the five main constructs. All constructs met or exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70 for internal consistency reliability, as recommended by Taber (2018). SEI demonstrated the highest reliability at $\alpha = 0.953$, followed by moral obligation at $\alpha = 0.904$ and self-efficacy at $\alpha = 0.873$, indicating excellent internal consistency. Social support had a reliability score of $\alpha = 0.740$, while empathy registered the minimum acceptable value of $\alpha = 0.700$. These results suggest that the measurement instruments used in this study were both consistent and suitable for further analysis.

Table 2 Cronbach's Alpha for Construct Reliability (N = 181)

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Social Entrepreneurial Intention	5	0.953
Empathy	4	0.700
Moral Obligation	5	0.904
Self-Efficacy	3	0.873
Social Support	4	0.740

Note. Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or above shows acceptable reliability (Taber, 2018).

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics for all study variables. All four independent variables demonstrated statistically significant and positive correlations with SEI, with all relationships significant at the $p < .001$ level. Self-efficacy exhibited the strongest correlation with SEI ($r = .593$, $p < .001$), followed by social support ($r = .539$, $p < .001$), empathy ($r = .514$, $p < .001$), and moral obligation ($r = .445$, $p < .001$). According to Turney (2023), correlation coefficients greater than 0.50 indicate strong relationships, while those ranging from 0.30 to 0.49 reflect moderate associations. Based on this guideline, SEI is strongly associated with self-efficacy, social support, and empathy, while moral obligation shows a moderate relationship. Additionally, although intercorrelations among the independent variables were present, none exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of $r = .80$ for multicollinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2019), affirming the discriminant validity and suitability of the variables for further analysis. These findings support the theoretical expectation that both psychological and social factors play a significant role in shaping students' SEI.

Table 3 Pearson Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
Social Entrepreneurial Intention (SEI)	3.520 (0.982)	—				
Empathy	3.468 (0.757)	.514***	—			
Moral Obligation	3.790 (0.804)	.445***	.657***	—		
Self-Efficacy	3.715 (0.766)	.593***	.564***	.729***	—	
Social Support	3.483 (0.689)	.539***	.567***	.635***	.763***	—

Note. $r > .50$ indicates a strong positive relationship (Turney, 2023). ***$p < .001$.

6.3 Regression Analysis Results

The hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis to determine the strength and significance of the relationships between the four independent variables and SEI. The model explained 41.3% of the variance in SEI ($R^2 = 0.413$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.400$), with the overall regression model yielding a statistically significant F-statistic ($F = 30.985$, $p < 0.001$). These findings confirm that the combined influence of empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support provides a meaningful and robust explanation of SEI.

Among the individual predictors, self-efficacy emerged as the most influential factor, evidenced by the highest F-value ($F = 97.016$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the critical role of students' confidence in their ability to initiate and manage social ventures (Table 4). Social support ($F = 73.287$), empathy ($F = 64.155$), and moral obligation ($F = 44.322$) also demonstrated significant positive associations with SEI (all $p < 0.001$). As noted by Field (2013), higher F-values indicate stronger predictive power in regression models. Collectively, these findings provide empirical support for all four proposed hypotheses and reinforce the relevance of psychological and social factors in shaping students' readiness to engage in social entrepreneurship.

Table 4 Predictor Summary: Correlation and ANOVA Results

Predictor	Correlation (*r*)	ANOVA F-value	*p*-value	Interpretation
Empathy	0.514	64.155	< .001	Strong positive and significant
Moral Obligation	0.445	44.322	< .001	Strong positive and significant
Self-Efficacy	0.593	97.016	< .001	Very strong positive and significant
Social Support	0.539	73.287	< .001	Strong positive and significant

Note. Higher F-values reflect stronger predictive power (Field, 2013). All predictors are significant at $p < .001$.

7. DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to explore the psychological and social factors that influence students' intentions to engage in social entrepreneurship, adding to the expanding literature in this emerging field. Based on the TPB and the EEM, the research investigated how empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support affect SEI. This inquiry is especially relevant now because educational institutions and policymakers are increasingly focusing on entrepreneurship education that fosters socially responsible and impact-driven graduates.

Among the four predictors, self-efficacy emerged as the most dominant factor influencing SEI among university students. This finding supports earlier studies that highlight the significant role of self-efficacy in shaping students' occupational interests and entrepreneurial behaviours (Permatasari et al., 2018; Samydevan et al., 2020). Students who possess a strong belief in their ability to overcome challenges and successfully launch a social venture are more likely to pursue such pathways (Hockerts, 2015). Samydevan et al. (2020) further emphasised that individuals who trust in their abilities and mindset are more likely to persist through entrepreneurial challenges. In the Malaysian context, where social entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted through education, enhancing self-efficacy via targeted programmes and hands-on experiences may play a vital role in equipping students to address societal issues through sustainable enterprise (Zulkifle et al., 2021; Zulkifle & Aziz, 2023).

The findings also confirm the positive contributions of empathy, moral obligation, and social support to SEI. Empathy facilitates perspective-taking and prosocial motivation, which are essential traits for aspiring social entrepreneurs (Mair & Noboa, 2006; Yudho & Kusmulyono, 2018). Moral obligation reflects a student's ethical drive to serve vulnerable communities, supporting prior research by Tiwari et al. (2017) and Sousa-Filho et al. (2020) that connects moral commitment with socially oriented career choices. Meanwhile, social support, particularly relevant in post-pandemic Malaysia, has become increasingly visible through community-driven responses such as *'Kita Jaga Kita'* (Zulkifle & Aziz, 2023; Kasri & Ismail, 2022). These results collectively suggest that while empathy, values, and support structures matter, the belief in one's ability is the strongest motivational lever to trigger social entrepreneurial action among university students.

7.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by empirically validating and extending Hockerts' (2015) SEI model in the underexplored context of Malaysian higher education. By integrating constructs from the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and the EEM (Shapero & Sokol, 1982), the research demonstrates how psychological (empathy, moral obligation, and self-efficacy) and social (social support) dimensions jointly influence students' intention to pursue social entrepreneurship. Theoretically, the study advances the literature by affirming that these antecedents, traditionally examined in isolation, operate in an interrelated manner to form a comprehensive cognitive-affective framework for SEI. Moreover, the identification of self-efficacy as the most dominant predictor deepens our understanding of internal agency's role in SEI, suggesting that confidence in one's capabilities may outweigh purely altruistic motives in driving entrepreneurial behaviour. By contextualising the model within a developing country's tertiary education landscape, this research also contributes to cross-cultural validation of intention-based frameworks and underscores the relevance of social entrepreneurship as a career-driven decision influenced by multidimensional forces. These insights refine and expand the theoretical boundaries of SEI research and provide a foundation for future comparative and longitudinal studies.

The findings of this study offer important practical implications for higher education institutions, educators, and policymakers aiming to foster SEI among university students. Since self-efficacy emerged as the strongest predictor of SEI, universities should prioritise experiential learning opportunities such as entrepreneurship simulations, project-based learning, and mentorship from social entrepreneurs to boost students' confidence in starting social ventures (Hockerts, 2015; Zulkifle et al., 2021). Additionally, the positive influence of empathy, moral obligation, and social support underscores the importance of integrating values-based education, peer networks, and socially focused extracurricular activities into the academic environment. On a broader level, policymakers should ensure that aspiring social entrepreneurs have access to support infrastructure (e.g., funding, regulatory incentives, and awareness initiatives) that normalise and reward social enterprise development in Malaysia (Zulkifle & Aziz, 2023). Collectively, these strategies can cultivate a generation of youth equipped with the skills, mindset, and ecosystem support to create sustainable social impact.

7.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the psychological and social antecedents of SEI among university students, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to 181 students from a single Malaysian university, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Future studies should incorporate larger, more diverse samples across multiple institutions and include comparative control groups to capture variation across social, demographic, or cultural contexts. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional design, limiting the ability to observe changes in SEI over time. Longitudinal research could track the evolution of intention and the translation of intention into actual entrepreneurial behaviour. Third, while the model focused on internal factors (e.g., empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support), future research should integrate external variables such as institutional environment, policy support, or cultural norms to build a more comprehensive framework. Lastly, although this study provides recommendations for social entrepreneurship education, it does not empirically evaluate specific curriculum models. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of targeted educational interventions in fostering SEI, particularly in diverse learning settings and stages of academic development.

8. CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of SEI by empirically investigating how empathy, moral obligation, self-efficacy, and social support influence the intention to engage in social entrepreneurship among university students in Malaysia. Drawing on the TPB and the EEM, the findings reveal that all four factors significantly contribute to the formation of SEI, with self-efficacy identified as the most influential predictor. These results highlight the importance of enhancing individual confidence, ethical commitment, emotional awareness, and supportive environments to promote social entrepreneurship across diverse student populations. The study not only affirms the theoretical relevance of existing intention models in the social entrepreneurship context but also provides valuable insights for educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers seeking to embed social entrepreneurship more deeply into higher education curricula. By deepening our understanding of what drives students to pursue social ventures, this study offers a strong foundation for designing education strategies and national initiatives that cultivate socially responsible, impact-oriented future leaders.

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