

Navigating Institutional Contradictions: Gendered Entrepreneurial Intentions in Hong Kong and the UK

Abstract

This paper examines how gendered entrepreneurial intentions are shaped by the interplay of formal and informal institutions in Hong Kong. Drawing on Institutional Theory and the concept of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), the study explores how pro-entrepreneurial policies and legal structures coexist and interact with enduring Confucian gender norms—creating institutional contradictions that differentially affect men's and women's entrepreneurial ambition. EO dimensions such as risk-taking, autonomy, and proactiveness are analysed as key mediating traits in this institutional context. Hong Kong is treated as a focal case for understanding how institutional duality produces gendered entrepreneurial dynamics, while the United Kingdom serves as a contrastive setting with more internally coherent institutional signals and a longer history of gender equity in enterprise.

The study adopts a qualitative approach, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with MBA students and early-career professionals in Hong Kong and the UK. Participants are asked to reflect on their entrepreneurial aspirations, perceptions of institutional support, and the cultural and gender-based factors that shape their decision-making. Thematic analysis is employed to explore how formal and informal institutions interact with gendered Entrepreneurial Orientation traits, particularly in relation to risk-taking and autonomy. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how women in culturally hybrid economies interpret and navigate institutional contradictions in their entrepreneurial journeys. The findings aim to inform gender-responsive entrepreneurship policy and education by foregrounding how cultural expectations may constrain access to opportunity—even when formal structures appear supportive.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognised as a catalyst for innovation and economic growth. However, gender disparities remain persistent across global entrepreneurial ecosystems. Despite expanding policy support, women continue to face barriers in accessing entrepreneurial opportunities (Elam et al., 2021; Bosma et al., 2020). These challenges are not limited to financial or educational constraints; they are often embedded in deeper institutional structures that influence how entrepreneurship is perceived, valued, and legitimised.

While formal institutions—such as policy frameworks, educational programmes, and financial systems—seek to promote inclusive entrepreneurship, they often coexist and interact with informal institutions that reinforce traditional gender norms. This dissonance can undermine the effectiveness of formal support, particularly for women navigating risk-heavy or leadership-oriented ventures (Brush et al., 2019; Carter et al., 2007). Existing literature often treats institutional support as gender-neutral or analyses entrepreneurial

intention through individual psychological models, overlooking how gendered interpretations of institutional environments may shape entrepreneurial trajectories.

This study focuses on Hong Kong, where a dual institutional context is arguably present: British-influenced legal and policy systems coexist with Confucian cultural values that may influence hierarchical and gendered expectations. This potential institutional contradiction provides a compelling context for exploring how women interpret and engage with entrepreneurial pathways. The United Kingdom is used as a contrastive context, given its more coherent institutional landscape and stronger gender equity policies.

The research is grounded in Institutional Theory (North, 1990) and Entrepreneurial Orientation or EO (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996), particularly the EO dimensions of risk-taking, autonomy, and proactiveness. These concepts are examined through a gendered lens to explore how women experience institutional encouragement or constraint. The study adopts a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews with MBA students and early-career professionals to investigate how gendered entrepreneurial intentions are constructed through the lived negotiation of formal opportunity and informal constraint.

2. Conceptual Framework

This study develops an integrative conceptual framework to explore how gendered entrepreneurial intentions are shaped by the interaction of formal and informal institutions in the Hong Kong context. Grounded in Institutional Theory (North, 1990), formal institutions are defined as codified systems such as entrepreneurship policies, legal frameworks, funding access, and educational programmes—structures designed to promote business creation and economic participation. Informal institutions, in contrast, include culturally embedded norms, gender expectations, family values, and broader social beliefs that influence how entrepreneurship is perceived and experienced. EO provides a lens for understanding individual-level dispositions—such as risk-taking, autonomy, and proactiveness—that inform entrepreneurial identity and ambition.

In Hong Kong, these institutional domains arguably often operate in tension: while formal policies may encourage entrepreneurship across genders, Confucian-rooted norms may continue to limit women's perceived legitimacy in high-risk, leadership-driven ventures. This framework foregrounds how individuals, particularly women, may interpret and navigate these competing institutional signals. Rather than seeking generalisable predictors, the study aims to understand how gendered entrepreneurial orientations are constructed through personal narratives, institutional exposure, and sociocultural positioning. The United Kingdom is included as a contrastive context to illuminate the distinctive nature of Hong Kong's institutional contradictions and to enrich cross-cultural reflection on gender and entrepreneurship.

Influence of Institutions on Entrepreneurial Intentions

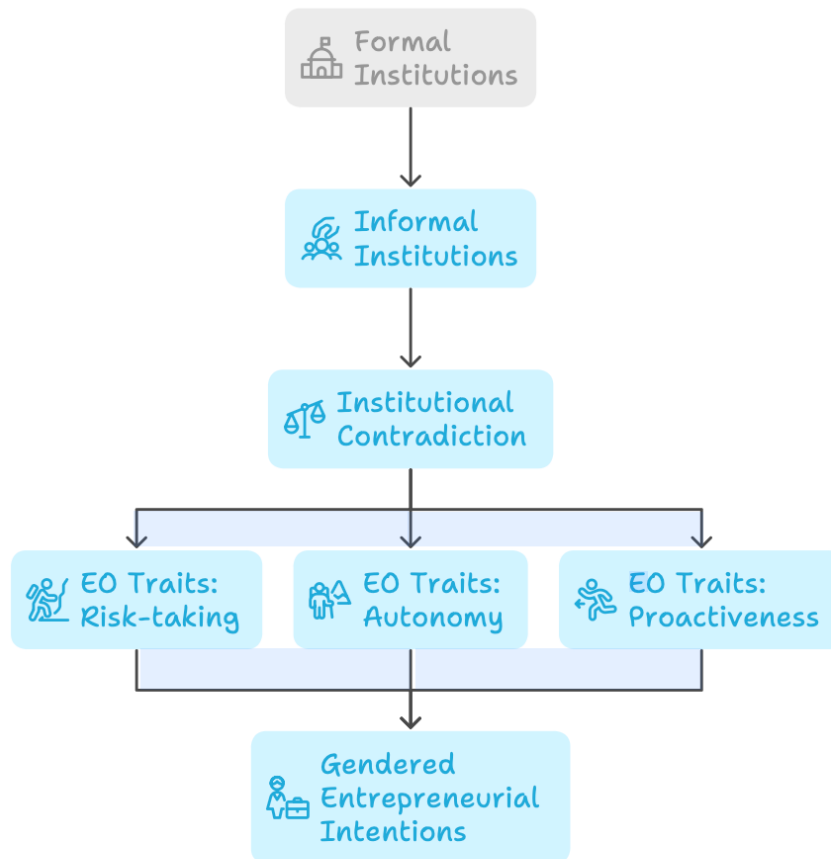


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Gendered Entrepreneurial Intentions in Hybrid Institutional Contexts

3. Literature review

3.1. Institutional Theory and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Institutional Theory offers a useful framework for understanding how entrepreneurial ecosystems are shaped not only by policy, law, and finance but also by social norms and cultural values. North (1990) distinguishes between formal institutions—codified structures such as government policy, education systems, and legal frameworks—and informal institutions, including traditions, cultural expectations, and gender roles. Together, these structures form the rules of the game that guide economic behaviour. In the context of entrepreneurship, institutions can either enable or constrain action depending on how they align with individual-level ambitions and societal legitimacy (Brush et al., 2019).

Recent scholarship suggests that institutional support for entrepreneurship is not automatically inclusive; it often reflects prevailing power dynamics, including gendered norms (Carter et al., 2007). In some cases, institutional systems encourage enterprise rhetorically while limiting it in practice, particularly for women operating within cultures that reinforce traditional roles. This contradiction is particularly pronounced in hybrid or transitional economies where institutional logics may be layered or conflicting—a condition highly relevant to the Hong Kong context.

3.2. Entrepreneurial Orientation and Gender

EO has become a widely accepted framework for capturing the behavioural traits associated with entrepreneurial intention and action. Lumpkin and Dess (1996) define EO through five core dimensions: innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness. For the purposes of this study, emphasis is placed on risk-taking, autonomy, and proactiveness, given their relevance to how individuals navigate uncertainty and assert entrepreneurial agency in socially structured contexts.

EO has traditionally been treated as a neutral set of traits, but recent work highlights how its expression is shaped by gendered conditioning (Liñán & Chen, 2009; Shinnar et al., 2012). Women may demonstrate EO traits in intention but hesitate to act due to perceived cultural constraints, especially in environments where leadership and risk are coded as masculine. Research shows that while men often report higher EO scores globally, this gap may not necessarily be due to capacity differences but rather to contextual and institutional barriers that shape self-efficacy and opportunity perception (Elam et al., 2021).

3.3. Informal Institutions, Culture, and Gendered Expectations

Informal institutions are particularly important when analysing gendered entrepreneurship. In Confucian-influenced societies, such as Hong Kong, deeply embedded cultural values reinforce expectations around family responsibility, modesty, and social conformity—expectations that often conflict with the traits identified in EO, such as autonomy and assertiveness (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). These cultural norms shape not only whether women pursue entrepreneurship but also how their ambitions are received and legitimised by family, peers, and the market.

While formal supports such as education and funding may exist, they may be undermined by informal norms that discourage women from stepping into entrepreneurial roles that challenge gender scripts. As Brush et al. (2019) argue, gender-neutral policies may be rare; entrepreneurship may need to be examined through a gender-aware institutional lens that considers how structural and cultural signals intersect. In Hong Kong, where institutional duality is strong, this tension becomes particularly visible. By contrast, the United Kingdom—while not free of informal bias—presents a more internally coherent environment in which formal supports are more closely aligned with gender inclusion goals (Bosma et al., 2020).

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore how individuals experience and interpret the institutional conditions shaping entrepreneurial intention. Rather than identify generalisable predictors, the study seeks to understand how women navigate the tensions between formal institutional support and informal cultural constraint in entrepreneurial contexts.

Data will be collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with MBA students and early-career professionals in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. Participants will be selected based on their exposure to entrepreneurship education and/or early-stage entrepreneurial activity, making them well positioned to reflect on institutional influences. The Hong Kong sample provides the primary analytical focus, given its hybrid institutional environment and deeply rooted Confucian values. The UK sample serves as a contrastive case to highlight institutional coherence and gender-policy development.

Interviews will be conducted either in person or via secure online platforms, recorded with informed consent, and transcribed for analysis. A thematic analysis approach will be employed to identify patterns in how participants interpret their entrepreneurial orientation—particularly dimensions such as risk-taking, autonomy, and proactiveness—in relation to gendered institutional signals.

Ethical approval will be obtained through the host university, ensuring participants' confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection in accordance with GDPR. Participants will have the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

This approach is justified by the study's aim to capture subjective interpretations of institutional experience—something that quantitative survey methods cannot adequately address. However, the study is limited by its sample scope, which may not represent broader entrepreneurial populations. The goal is not generalisation, but to offer contextual and conceptual insight into how institutional contradictions shape gendered entrepreneurial intentions in culturally hybrid settings.

5. Intended Contributions

This study may reveal that institutional contradictions in Hong Kong—between pro-entrepreneurial policies and Confucian cultural norms—significantly shape the entrepreneurial intentions of women. While participants may report alignment with EO traits such as risk-taking and autonomy, informal institutional pressures are likely to influence whether these traits are acted upon. Women may internalise or resist culturally embedded expectations around modesty, family roles, and social risk, which in turn affect their entrepreneurial confidence and legitimacy. The UK, used as a contrastive setting, is expected to display a more consistent alignment between formal supports and informal acceptance of women in entrepreneurial leadership, though subtle constraints may still persist.

The study contributes conceptually by integrating Institutional Theory with gendered interpretations of EO—an intersection that remains underdeveloped in current literature. Methodologically, it responds to a possible over-reliance on quantitative EO metrics by offering qualitative insights into how gender and culture mediate entrepreneurial identity.

Contextually, it highlights Hong Kong as a critical site for studying institutional duality and its implications for inclusive entrepreneurship.

Practically, the findings can inform gender-responsive entrepreneurship policy and programme design. In particular, they underscore the need for initiatives that move beyond access to funding and training and address the informal norms that shape entrepreneurial behaviour. Educational institutions and ecosystem stakeholders may also benefit from understanding how to better support women navigating culturally conflicted entrepreneurial environments.

6. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study is intended to advance understanding of gendered entrepreneurial intentions by examining how individuals navigate conflicting institutional signals in culturally hybrid economies. By choosing Hong Kong as a context with institutional duality—where formal pro-entrepreneurial policies coexist with deeply rooted Confucian gender norms—the research highlights the limitations of gender-neutral ecosystem design. Drawing on Institutional Theory and EO, the study explores how women interpret and act upon entrepreneurial ambition within systems that may both enable and constrain them.

Through a qualitative, interpretivist approach, the study contributes a context-sensitive lens on how gender, culture, and institutional structure intersect to shape entrepreneurial orientation. Findings are intended to inform more inclusive and context-aware entrepreneurship policies, particularly in regions marked by institutional layering and cultural contradiction.

Future research could extend this work by including other hybrid or transitional economies, adopting longitudinal methods to explore institutional evolution over time, or incorporating an intersectional lens to examine how ethnicity, class, and familial expectation further mediate gendered entrepreneurial pathways.

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