

REDEFINING CAREER PATHWAYS: ENTREPRENEURIAL ASPIRATIONS OF GENERATION Z IN PAKISTAN'S KP REGION

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Abstract

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan's Generation Z students' entrepreneurial motivations and socio-cultural elements are examined in this study. Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making is used to evaluate public and private university students' psychological, structural, and social influences on entrepreneurship decisions in the qualitative narrative study. Autonomy, digital platforms, and self-governance drive these students to be entrepreneurs. Financial uncertainty, gender-related stigma—especially for female entrepreneurs—and a lack of practical business education also present obstacles. Family expectations, cultural narratives, and entrepreneurial role models influenced career choices, with digital entrepreneurship desire rising. University courses lack entrepreneurial understanding, and participants wanted more funding, mentorship, and helpful platforms. Gender dynamics and economic uncertainty hinder entrepreneurship. These findings help policymakers, educators, and support groups promote youth-driven entrepreneurship and Pakistan's developing generation's economic potential.

Keywords: Generation Z, Entrepreneurship, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan youth, Socio-cultural context, Entrepreneurial motivation,

Introduction

With more people choosing self-employment over traditional employment, the global trend has grown. Innovation, productivity, and job creation could transform economies with this transformation. By 2019, there were over one billion self-employed people globally, up from 600 million in 2000 (ILO, 2019). The gig

economy and online platforms for freelance and contract labor have driven this transition. Self-employment is vital in developing nations when official work is scarce (Bonnet et al., 2019). Entrepreneurship has increased in Pakistan due to private sector dynamism and state policy initiatives. The country's Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rose from 8.3% in 2019 to 13.7% in 2020, showing more new business endeavors, according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2019–2020). This development is due to more tech-savvy youth, growing e-commerce, and better startup support. 62% of Pakistanis consider entrepreneurship a respectable job, demonstrating considerable social support for business growth. The Prime Minister's Startup Pakistan programme, the State Bank of Pakistan's fintech regulatory sandbox, and the Pakistan Software Export Board's National Incubation Centres have improved startup support (Iqbal & Rashid, 2022). Despite these advances, Pakistani entrepreneurs still struggle with finance and regulations. However, government backing and youth engagement are likely to grow the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Chughtai, 2022). TEA and other government programs have helped Pakistan's business ecosystem grow in recent years. Increased startup numbers have driven this growth. However, there are still many challenges, and the government and other stakeholders must continue to support Pakistani entrepreneurs (Chughtai, 2022). Entrepreneurship has become a major economic driver due to its ability to create jobs, spur innovation, and raise capital. However, becoming an entrepreneur is hard and depends on personal traits, environmental factors, and institutional support (Chughtai, 2022).

Context of the Study

This study aimed to explore the motivational characteristics that drive individuals belonging to KP, Pakistan's Generation Z, specifically focusing on those who attended public universities and private sector universities in the KP region and aspire to become business owners. Additionally, the research endeavors to examine the influence of contextual (social) factors on the entrepreneurial career goals of Generation Z students at public sector universities and Private sector universities in the KP province. The primary objective of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the entrepreneurial endeavors that young individuals are interested in and to provide empirical evidence regarding the factors that shape their decision-making processes. The findings of this research will contribute to the effective management of self-employment opportunities, which are vital for job creation and economic expansion.

Covid-19 and Entrepreneurial Landscape in Pakistan

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistani Generation Z encountered much of the same difficulties as their peers elsewhere. Many young people were compelled to reevaluate their professional goals because of the pandemic's immediate and widespread effects on the labor market and the economy. The pandemic influenced Pakistani members of Generation Z to reevaluate their educational and professional goals (Perna, 2021). Young people were forced to adjust to new realities and find

creative methods to make ends meet due to the rise of distance learning and the decline of local enterprises. Since this was the case, some people used their ingenuity, fortitude, and technological know-how to launch businesses (Mason, 2021).

Research from Pakistan's Next Generation Pakistan series (Pakistan - The Next Generation Report 2023 (2023)) stressed the value of including young people's opinions and ideas in policy discussions. This affirmation reflects a rising awareness of Generation Z's power to shape the business world and advance the nation. The members of Generation Z, often known as the "Net Generation" or "GenerationNext," were raised in a society heavily influenced by the proliferation of digital media and globalization. Entrepreneurship may benefit greatly from the inherent affinity for technology and social media that these digital natives have. By using the internet and online marketplaces, young Pakistani business owners have expanded their consumer base outside their country's borders.

In addition, Pakistan's Generation Z members are well-recognized for their tolerance, flexibility, and pragmatism (Jamal, 2020). This way of thinking and the entrepreneur's drive have inspired today's youth to forge their paths. They have learned the value of independence and making the most of opportunities, even in the face of adversity. As a result of the pandemic's effect on employment opportunities, some members of Pakistan's Generation Z may have been motivated to start their businesses (Jamal, 2020). Some members of Pakistan's Generation Z faced unusual situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting them to contemplate starting their businesses (Nasar, Akram, Safdar, & Akbar, 2022). The capacity of today's youth to adapt to changing circumstances, become technologically literate, and think creatively in various contexts has paved the way for a new wave of entrepreneurs.

Problem Statement

As Generation Z enters its prime working years, it becomes imperative to understand their entrepreneurial motivations and preferences before they assume significant leadership roles in the economy. In Pakistan, where youth comprise a significant majority, these understanding gains even greater urgency. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2019), 64% of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30, a demographic that is frequently characterized as the backbone of the nation's future. In January 2022, Pakistan's total population was recorded at 227.3 million, with 48.5% female and 51% male (Kemp, 2022). Furthermore, 51.7% of the population is under 25 years of age (Index Mundi, 2019), and 29% falls within the 15–29 age bracket—commonly referred to as youth (Ahmad, 2018). This demographic trend is projected to continue until at least 2050, underscoring the long-term importance of youth-centered research. Similar to their global peers, members of Generation Z in Pakistan have grown up in a digitally connected world. They share content, thoughts, and opinions on social media with local and worldwide networks (Jamal, 2020). There is little empirical research on Pakistani Generation Z's entrepreneurial objectives and motives, especially in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. We investigate the characteristics that influence entrepreneurial inclinations among Generation Z students at public and private colleges in KP to address this gap. The study seeks to understand Gen Z's entrepreneurship motivations and their desired

company ventures. Policymakers, educators, and business support organizations must understand young self-employment decisions since entrepreneurship is crucial to job creation and economic development.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the following questions based on the identified gaps in the academic literature about the career aspirations of Gen Z in KP, Pakistan, toward entrepreneurship and self-employment choices.

Central Research Questions:

RQ1: How do Generation Z at public sector universities and private sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa perceive entrepreneurship as a career aspiration?

Sub-Questions:

How are the Socio-psychological factors influencing the perception of entrepreneurship as a career aspiration among Generation Z at public sector universities and private sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

How do Generation Z perceive the challenges and opportunities of entrepreneurship in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

RQ2: How does the Socio-Cultural context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa influence Generation Z's perceptions of entrepreneurship as a career aspiration?

Sub-Questions:

How do cultural and societal norms affect Generation Z's attitudes toward entrepreneurship?

How do societal and cultural expectations regarding employment and career paths affect Generation Z's views on entrepreneurship as a career aspiration?

Objectives of the Study

The following research objectives are intended to guide the development of this study's framework/thematic map, which will support the overall entrepreneurial career aspiration of Pakistani Gen Z students studying in public and private sector universities in the KP region.

RO1: To explore how do Generation Z at public sector universities and private sector universities in KP perceive entrepreneurship as a career aspiration.

RO2: To explore the Socio-psychological factors that influence the perception of entrepreneurship as a career aspiration among Generation Z at public sector universities and private sector universities in KP.

RO3: To explore how do Generation Z perceive the challenges and opportunities of entrepreneurship in KP.

RO4: Explore how does the socio-cultural context of KP influence Generation Z's perceptions of entrepreneurship as a career aspiration.

RO5: Explore how do cultural and societal norms affect Generation Z's attitudes towards entrepreneurship.

RO6: Explore how do societal and cultural expectations regarding employment and career paths affect Generation Z's views on entrepreneurship as a career aspiration.

Significance of the Study

Entrepreneurship is increasingly viewed as a driver of economic and social development in developed and developing nations (Taylor & Plummer, 2003; Matlay, 2001). Entrepreneurship is considered as a strategy to address economic decline and rising youth unemployment, especially among university graduates, in emerging nations like Pakistan (Longe, 2017). Entrepreneurship is taught in higher education to prepare students for self-employment and innovation. This study explores Generation Z's attitudes, actions, and professional expectations. Generation Z is digitally savvy, goal-oriented, and prefers professional flexibility and adaptability (Mahmood et al., 2020; Otieno & Nyambegera, 2019; Tang, 2019). They differ substantially from past generations, affecting Generation Z's business. Despite global interest in Generation Z's business potential, Pakistan rarely studies KP youth's entrepreneurial motives. This study addresses this gap by studying Generation Z's entrepreneurial intentions at regional public and private institutions. It examines the emotional, societal, and institutional elements that influence individual company ownership goals, focusing on self-employment as a socioeconomic ladder. Understanding Generation Z's motives is crucial as they enter the workforce and drive Pakistan's economy. This study can educate policies and strategies to encourage youth entrepreneurship, job creation, and sustainable economic growth by revealing their entrepreneurial mindsets.

Literature Review

Introduction to Pakistan: The Significance of the Young Pakistani

Pakistan is the seventh most populous nation with over 220 million people (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Around 63 percent of the country's population are young people aged between 15 and 33 (UN Population Fund Report 2017). The years spent growing up are marked by several significant changes, including physical, cognitive, sexual, emotional, and social. Particularly significant is the adolescent period, when "lifelong health habits are created, when routes of opportunity or danger arise, and when the future life course starts to take shape" (McCarthy, Brady, & Hallman, 2016). The possibilities presented to adolescents and young adults throughout their formative years, as well as the environments in which they find themselves as they transition into adulthood, have the potential to mark the course of the rest of their lives indelibly. As a result, youth and the early years of adulthood represent a critical stage in a person's life during which effective policies and interventions in the areas of health, social, educational, and economic development have the potential to protect young people from harm and reroute their life paths toward positive and fruitful growth. We may do this with children while they are still in their formative years and are more receptive to novel concepts. The importance of youth in development has come to be more widely recognized in recent years. Kugelman and Hathaway (2011) and Sathar, Royan, and Bongaarts (2013) argue that Pakistan's best opportunity of realizing the demographic dividend lies in the country's huge population of young people.

Pakistan's commitment to youth investment as a development strategy has been bolstered by the country's recent endorsement of the 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The agenda for sustainable development acknowledges that young people play a key role as agents of change on a global scale, making this recognition an essential component of the agenda. There are 169 targets for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is a direct or indirect reference to young people in as many as 65 of these aims, and 20 of these targets pertain especially to young people. These twenty goals are connected to fighting hunger (goal 2), education (goal 4), equality between the sexes (goal 5), decent job (goal 8), fighting inequality (goal 10), and tackling climate change (goal 13). In addition, both Goal 16 (societies that are peaceful, just, and inclusive) and Goal 17 (partnerships and implementation) suggest that young people should be engaged in, and participate in, the process of development and accountability (UNDP, 2016).

Generation Z

Gen Z, also known as the iGeneration, Post-Millennials, and Homeland Generation, is the most recently identified generation. Birth years from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s have been used by researchers, as pointed out by Bejtkovsk (2016). This group has just graduated from college or university and will enter the workforce shortly. Compared to the Millennial generation, this group has had earlier and more extensive exposure to technological innovations, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), social media, and mobile computing (Malnar, 2019). Management styles that are less formal and more organic will be more appealing to Generation Z than those that are more bureaucratic (Robbins, Judge, Odendaal, & Roodt, 2016). This generation does not want to be coddled but rather led by authoritative managers unafraid to take on bureaucratic norms (Schroth, 2019). The millennial generation values originality and originality in the workplace more than comfort and routine (Hampton & Keys, 2017). The term "Youth Bulge" is used to describe the phenomena of a growing youth population. The phenomenon of youth bulge develops when neonatal death has been slashed, however women continue to have a tall fertility rate, as noted by economist Lin (2012) in his World Bank blog. Hence, a significant proportion of the population consists of young people. The dependency ratio, or the proportion of the population that is not of working age relative to the working age population, falls in a nation with a youth bulge as more and more young people join the labor force. In modern-day Pakistan, the situation is reversed from what one would assume, given the country's youthful population and its potential for increased productivity and economic development. Young Pakistanis have a wide range of difficult worries and disappointments. The youth bulge has been expanding for a long time, and according to Lin's theory, our nation is sitting on a demographic time bomb since the young unemployment rate is high. Lin's claims are supported by Fuller's (1995) Youth Bulge theory, which suggests that a state with a sizable youth population is more likely to experience economic stagnation, militancy, social unrest, and political conflicts as a result of policies rationalizing the social inequalities of youth, the urban-rural divide, and quota systems in the country due to vested interest. Education and health care

gaps and disengagement from politics and civic life contribute to Pakistan's disenfranchised young population.

Among young Pakistanis, roughly 25% are illiterate, and the unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma is 8.2% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016–17). According to Hafeez (2017), the primary school graduation rate is one of the lowest in the world, and access to education is a major contributing factor. It is worth mentioning that just 2.2% of the budget goes toward education, while 3.6% goes into defense. Pakistan's Human Development Index ranking of 147 out of 188 nations and its Global Youth Development Index ranking of 154 lend credence to this claim (a compound index measuring youth progress under five key areas of education, health and wellbeing, employment, civic participation, and political engagement). The indicator shows that between 2010 and 2015, civic engagement in the nation decreased by 18%, mostly owing to a steep decline in political engagement (69%). Even more ironic is that Pakistan's neighbors India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan all fared higher on the global youth development index than Pakistan did (at positions 133, 147, and 167, respectively), despite all the suffering in Syria. One of the most telling indicators of young people's engagement in civic and political life is the lack of a coherent national youth strategy (GYDI&R, 2016).

Self-employment

Recent scholarship has examined the appeal, challenges, and triumphs of self-employment entrepreneurship. To reduce graduate unemployment, developing nations must teach students about self-employment. Entrepreneurship education (EE) has been widely used to boost students' self-employment intentions (SEI), although its results vary by setting. Gerba (2012) discovered that Ethiopian business and engineering students who participated in EE had stronger entrepreneurial aspirations. (Ebewo et al., 2017) found that EE helps students start businesses. (Farashah, 2013) also found that taking an entrepreneurship course increases entrepreneurial intent by According to (Afolabi et al., (2017), EE supports Nigerian scientific and technology students to create firms. Other investigations (BarbaSánchez & Atienza-Sahuquillo, 2017; Gelaidan & Abdullateef, 2017; Gerba, 2012; Kisubi et al., 2021) agree. These conclusions are based on the idea that college attendance gives entrepreneurs an edge. Self-efficacy and entrepreneurial ambition may predict youth self-employment (Naktiyok et al., 2010). Self-efficacy positively correlated with entrepreneurship ambitions, which predicted self-employment. The authors suggest that self-efficacy and entrepreneurial ambition therapies may help people start their own businesses. (Kisubi et al., 2021) explored how entrepreneurship education affects college students' plans to start their own businesses. The study found that entrepreneurship education increased the likelihood of self-employment, suggesting that it may help people start their own businesses. Finally, the literature on entrepreneurship as self-employment covers several subjects, including the causes, challenges, and results of going it alone. Research suggests self-efficacy, entrepreneurial intention, entrepreneurship education, and problem-solving as effective ways to encourage self-employment.

Underpinning theory/Theoretical Lens

Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making

John D. Krumboltz developed the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (SLTCMD). It explains career choices' factors. The hypothesis states that learning opportunities in society influence profession choices rather than individual traits or preferences (Saunders, 2021). Krumboltz's idea states that parents, teachers, friends, and mentors teach people about profession alternatives. Social factors determine career beliefs, attitudes, and values. The above hypothesis emphasises that people gain and revise their career knowledge throughout their lives (Span & Space, 2023). Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory stresses chance and unexpected chances in career decision-making. The approach recognises that unanticipated meetings, unexpected employment chances, and personal circumstances can significantly effect a career (Kim, 2022). Krumboltz's idea emphasizes self-efficacy, or confidence in job success. This theoretical framework claims that mastery experiences, vicarious learning (by seeing others' triumphs), social persuasion, and physiological and emotional conditions shape self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy affects job choices and activities (Evans, Chen, & Hudes, 2020). Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making is widely used in career development. The statement highlights the impact of social circumstances, learning experiences, chance events, and self-efficacy beliefs on career paths. Career counselors can help clients make informed and important career decisions by understanding these aspects (Evans, Chen, & Hudes, 2020). Krumboltz's social learning theory of career decision-making (SLTCMD) states that people choose careers based on their social context's learning possibilities (Saunders, 2021). This theory was used to examine entrepreneurship as a career goal among Pakistan Gen-Z students entering in public and private universities at KP after the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher created a conceptual map about the key components and interconnections.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A Narrative Approach

The narrative approach was born in the social sciences (particularly anthropology and sociology), but it has since spread to other fields, including education, healthcare, and the humanities. Furthermore, because of its rapid expansion over the last several decades, it is currently integrated into various academic fields. Employing a narrative approach while doing qualitative research has several advantageous effects. To begin, people can tell stories naturally, which makes it quite simple to evoke these stories out of them. Second, it is easy to collect comprehensive data since narratives often include thick descriptions. Last but not least, it can acquire meaning in more detail since participants often expose themselves in their tales (Butina, 2015). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) developed an interpretative strategy that derives its conceptual foundation from postmodernism and phenomenology. Furthermore, the interpretive strategy derives its methodological roots from Clifford Geertz's idea of 'thick

descriptions' (Geertz, 1973). His approach, designed to analyze pivotal points in people's lives, inspired him to invent "interpretive biography" for his methodology. This research relies on life histories, personal narratives, records, and obituaries as their data sources. He also guides how the data should be interpreted and used. The questions that have been posed are focused on how individuals make sense of their own lives, how they live their lives, and how meaning is derived in writing, in narratives, and orally. The technique he adopts to answer these concerns creates a discourse that addresses an ongoing challenge found in sociology. The selection of in-depth interviews allowed for extracting the deeper meanings underlying entrepreneurial mentality among Gen Z in KP, Pakistan, offering comprehensive results and contextualization of those findings (Zahra, 2011; Zahra & Wright, 2011). This allows for the study to give both comprehensive findings and contextualization.

S. No	Pseudonym	Gender	University
1.	R1	Female	Public
2.	R2	Female	Private
3.	R3	Male	Public
4.	R4	Male	Public
5.	R5	Female	Public
6.	R6	Female	Public
7.	R7	Male	Public
8.	R8	Male	Public
9.	R9	Female	Public
10.	R10	Male	Private
11.	R11	Male	Private
12.	R12	Male	Private
13.	R13	Female	Private
14.	R14	Male	Private
15.	R15	Male	Private
16.	R16	Male	Public
17.	R17	Male	Private
18.	R18	Male	Private
19.	R19	Male	Private
20.	R20	Male	Public
21.	R21	Male	Public
22.	R22	Male	Private
23.	R23	Male	Private
24.	R24	Female	Private

Narrative research emphasizes the examination of personal narratives and life histories instead of relying only on established theories (Garter et al., 2010).

Therefore, the current study employed a narrative approach to get nuanced and thick accounts of the respondents.

Sample Frame

Due to the specificity of the study's geographic focus and the fact that purposeful sampling permits participants to be selected based on their known characteristics, it was used to investigate what factors influence the career aspirations of Gen Z in KP, Pakistan toward entrepreneurship (Gill, 2020). Respondent(s) were chosen in qualitative sampling based on the study's objectives (Ritchie, Lewis & Spencer, 2003).

Table 1: Study Respondents

Technique(s) for data analysis and Interpretation

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis (TA), and specifically the approach they have developed (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013), is a widely used method in qualitative research. Braun and Clarke were the first to present Reflexive Thematic Analysis to evaluate qualitative data in social science research. Since then, it has become one of the most popular methods available. It entails a process that is both methodical and iterative, during which patterns, themes, and categories within the data are identified and analyzed while also understanding the researcher's role in the study. While doing qualitative research, the suitability of adopting Reflexive Thematic Analysis is contingent upon several criteria, including the research question, the nature of the data, and the research strategy.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis of interview data is presented here. Based on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Generation Z business graduates' entrepreneurship attitudes, the analysis reveals significant themes and subthemes. This study's research questions and objectives guide the findings of the study.

Theme 1: The Allure of Entrepreneurial Autonomy: A Gateway to Self-Determination
During the interviews it was suggested by the majority of the respondents that entrepreneurship is becoming a way to break out from regular employment and gain self-determination. Despite the hazards, many business graduates want independence, financial stability, and professional autonomy. Entrepreneurship promises professional independence and autonomy, which attracts many. Entrepreneurship is seen as a road to professional and personal freedom, unlike hierarchical employment with limited financial incentives.

Subtheme 1.1: Breaking Free from Conventional Employment

The respondents stated that the traditional jobs lacked financial growth and freedom, which turned off many people. Entrepreneurship was thought to lead to financial freedom and prosperity.

As one respondent stated,

"The main motivation for me in choosing entrepreneurship is financial independence. Jobs don't always offer the kind of income we aspire for." Respondent 12 Male
In a similar vein another participant commented,
"I want to build a business that confirms long-term wealth and stability for myself and my family." Respondent 19 Male

Subtheme 1.2: The Psychological Appeal of Self-Governance

Entrepreneurship brings psychological benefits as well as financial ones. Respondents valued business strategy, decision-making, and success autonomously.

"Entrepreneurship means I get to be my own boss. I don't want to work under someone else's authority." Respondent 1 Female

"Owning a business gives you much control over decision-making process rather than being dictated by someone else." Respondent 9 Female

Theme 2: The Entrepreneurial Paradox – A Risky Yet Liberating Path

Entrepreneurship is unpredictable and difficult, yet it offers independence and financial opportunity. Many respondents noted that fear of failure often coexists with enthusiasm of potential accomplishment.

Subtheme 2.1: The Duality of Fear and Courage

Entrepreneurship is risky, but participants said overcoming fear is crucial. Social norms limit risk-taking, while individuals who accepted uncertainty were more likely to start businesses.

One respondent stated,

"Our society prefers safety. Many people avoid entrepreneurship because of the risk involved." Respondent 5 Male

Another one said,

"Failure is seen as a big setback, and people fear losing money and reputation." Respondent 11 Male

Subtheme 2.2: The Transformational Power of Entrepreneurial Struggles

Many interviewees shared stories of learning from failure, highlighting that entrepreneurship is not just about financial gains but also personal growth.

Overcoming setbacks was seen as a crucial aspect of success.

As one respondent stated,

"Running a business teaches skills you can't learn in a classroom. You learn by doing." Respondent 16 Male

In a similar vein another participant commented,

"Even if you fail, the experience prepares you for future success." Respondent 18 Male

Theme 3: The Interplay of Socio-Psychological Forces in Entrepreneurial Decision-Making

Family expectations, cultural narratives, and personal attitudes influence entrepreneurship. These factors either encourage or discourage business ownership.

Family and society often shape entrepreneurial ambitions. Family companies and entrepreneurial role models inspire some, while cultural standards favor steady jobs.

Subtheme 3.1: Career Pathways Shaped by Familial Expectations

Many young individuals feel forced to work rather than start a business due to family expectations. However, business-oriented households encouraged more entrepreneurship.

As one respondent commented,

"My parents always emphasized on having job security over business, so entrepreneurship wasn't encouraged." Respondent 6 Female

Another one said,

"Having a family business helped me a lot to gain confidence in starting my own venture." Respondent 4 Male

Subtheme 3.2: Mentorship and Role Models as Catalysts for Change

Young people are often inspired to start businesses by family or community entrepreneurs. Role models teach and inspire.

As one respondent suggested,

"My elder brother is an entrepreneur, and his journey has inspired me a lot to pursue business." Respondent 17 Male

In a similar vein another participant commented,

"Seeing successful entrepreneurs in our society makes us believe it's possible." Respondent 2 Male

Theme 4: The Psychological DNA of an Entrepreneur

The psychological traits necessary for entrepreneurship—such as risk-taking, resilience, and adaptability—were recurring themes in the interviews. Some participants described an internal drive to take initiative, while others noted that fear of failure held them back.

Subtheme 4.1: The Balancing Act Between Risk and Resilience

Entrepreneurs must navigate both external and internal challenges. Risk-taking was often viewed as an essential but daunting aspect of business ownership.

As one respondent commented,

"Taking risks is necessary in business, but not everyone is mentally prepared for failures." Respondent 13 Male

Another one remarked,

"Persistence and patience are key to becoming a successful entrepreneur." Respondent 2 Male

Subtheme 4.2: The Mindset Shift from Employee to Innovator

Many respondents highlighted a shift in mindset as a prerequisite for success, noting that confidence in one's abilities and the willingness to challenge conventional thinking were key enablers.

One respondent remarked,
"Believing in yourself is the first step to taking on the entrepreneurial journey."

Respondent 2 Male

In a similar vein another participant commented,

"I want to prove to myself and others that I can build something on my own."

Respondent 1 Female

Theme 5: Digital Entrepreneurship – The New Frontier

Technology is lowering entry barriers and opening new opportunities for entrepreneurs. Digital platforms enable young entrepreneurs to scale firms with little investment. Many young entrepreneurs are using technology to break down barriers and access global markets thanks to e-commerce and digital marketing.

Subtheme 5.1: The Power of Social Media Marketing

TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook are changing business paradigms. Many respondents said social media helps them promote, brand, and engage with customers. One said,

"Platforms like TikTok and Instagram have opened doors for small businesses to market their products." Respondent 11 Male

Another one remarked,

"E-commerce is growing rapidly, and I see huge potential in online business."

Respondent 13 Male

Subtheme 5.2: The Role of Online Marketplaces

Digital marketplaces like Amazon, Daraz, and Shopify help young entrepreneurs start businesses cheaply.

One respondent remarked,

"In an era of social media, I would choose an online business, specifically an Amazon business." Respondent 7 Male

Another one commented,

"Online selling eliminates the need for a physical store, reducing startup costs."

Respondent 24 Female

Theme 6: Gender and Entrepreneurship – Breaking the Barriers

Cultural expectations influence entrepreneurship, especially for women. Despite defying stereotypes, many female entrepreneurs suffer family and society pushback. Cultural barriers and lack of support keep women underrepresented in entrepreneurship despite increased awareness.

Subtheme 6.1: Overcoming Societal Stigma

Many female respondents reported feeling discouraged by societal attitudes that favor men in business. However, some are actively working to change perceptions.

One respondent remarked,

"Women entrepreneurs are not taken seriously. They face more challenges in gaining trust and investment." Respondent 1 Female

Another one commented,

"Many families prefer daughters to take up stable jobs rather than start businesses."
Respondent 9 Female

Subtheme 6.2: Support Systems for Female Entrepreneurs

Some women highlighted the importance of mentorship programs and networking groups in helping them navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship.

"We need more mentorship opportunities for women to gain confidence in business."
Respondent 9 Female

"Incubation centers should prioritize female entrepreneurs to create a level playing field." Respondent 24 Female

Theme 7: Entrepreneurship in an Unstable Economy

Economic conditions play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial decisions. Many participants noted that Pakistan's economic instability influences their willingness to take financial risks. While entrepreneurship is seen as a pathway to financial security, economic instability often deters risk-taking.

Subtheme 7.1: Inflation and Startup Costs

Rising inflation and high startup costs make it difficult for new entrepreneurs to enter the market.

One respondent remarked,

"Getting funding is the biggest challenge. Banks don't easily lend to startups."

Respondent 13 Male

Another one commented,

"Many young people have ideas but no financial backing to execute them."

Respondent 5 Female

Subtheme 7.2: Government Policies and Support

Some participants argued that government programs could do more to support young entrepreneurs.

As one respondent said,

"Government should provide more funding and tax relief for startups." Respondent 7 Male

Another one commented,

"Business incubation centers should be more active in mentoring young entrepreneurs." Respondent 17 Male

Theme 8: The Entrepreneurial Knowledge Gap

A recurring issue among participants was the lack of practical entrepreneurial education in university curricula. While business students learn theoretical concepts, many feel unprepared for real-world challenges.

As one respondent said,

"We need more hands-on projects and mentorship to bridge the gap between learning and doing." Respondent 6 Male

Another one commented,

"Universities focus a lot on theory and less on practical entrepreneurship training."
Respondent 13 Male

Subtheme 8.1: The Need for Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Many responders stressed government-private sector partnership to promote entrepreneurship. Business incubators, accelerators, and mentorship programs were essential yet underutilized.

One of the participants stated,

"Business incubation centers should be more active in mentoring young entrepreneurs." Respondent 19 Male

Another one commented,

"Without structured support, young entrepreneurs struggle to scale their ideas into sustainable businesses." Respondent 4 Male

Discussion

This study examines Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Generation Z business graduates' entrepreneurship motives and challenges. According to Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Profession Decision Making (SLTCDM), learning, environment, and social interactions affect profession choices (Krumboltz, 2009). Young graduates in this region approach entrepreneurship based on entrepreneurial autonomy, risk and resilience, socio-psychological factors, digital entrepreneurship, gender hurdles, economic instability, and knowledge gaps.

Entrepreneurial Autonomy and the Psychological Drive for Self-Governance

Participants' desire for entrepreneurial autonomy supports previous findings that autonomy and financial independence motivate entrepreneurs (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2019). Research indicates Generation Z entrepreneurs prioritize self-governance and job flexibility (Priporas et al., 2017; Dabić et al., 2021). As role models and success stories motivate, observational learning and environmental factors create goals (Krumboltz, 2009). Contrary opinions imply not all Generation Zers choose autonomy above stability. (Twenge, 2020) found that this generation selected structured job over entrepreneurship due to economic uncertainty and risk aversion. This comparison shows Generation Z's realism and entrepreneurship.

The Entrepreneurial Paradox: Risk and Resilience

Entrepreneurship carries risks, but participants stressed resilience and learning from failure. This supports (Nabi et al., 2017), who found that experiential learning and overcoming obstacles build entrepreneurial resilience. Krumboltz's SLTCDM also suggests that positive reinforcement and learnt experiences alter career preferences, explaining why many young entrepreneurs keep going after setbacks (Krumboltz, 2009). In contrast, (Shepherd et al., 2021) found that failure can inhibit entrepreneurial aspirations, especially in societies that stigmatize failure. In Pakistan,

social views about company failure inhibit risk-taking, which may limit the number of new entrepreneurs who persevere (Roomi & Harrison, 2010).

Socio-Psychological and Cultural Influences on Entrepreneurial Aspirations

Family and cultural expectations influenced business decisions. According to (Ajzen's ,1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, subjective standards strongly impact career intentions. (Farani et al., 2017) found that family support encourages entrepreneurship, especially in family-business cultures. Contrary studies suggest that societal pressure may steer people toward traditional careers rather than entrepreneurship in collectivist countries (Hofstede, 2010). Social expectations can discourage entrepreneurship in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, since government positions are the norm (Roomi & Harrison, 2010).

Digital Entrepreneurship: A New Frontier for Generation Z

The report shows that entrepreneurs are increasingly using Instagram, TikTok, and online markets. (Obschonka et al., 2020) found that digitization lowers entrance barriers for young entrepreneurs. Digital platforms allow young business graduates to avoid large beginning fees, supporting Krumboltz's focus on environmental factors influencing job choices (Krumboltz, 2009). Studies imply that digital entrepreneurship is less profitable and reliable than traditional business methods. (Nambisan, 2021) found that digital enterprises require digital literacy, financial acumen, and adaptability to prosper. Many young entrepreneurs lack the training to fully harness digital potential, separating ambition from success (Obschonka et al., 2020).

Gender and Entrepreneurship: Breaking Cultural Barriers

Participants said social stigma and lack of support make it hard for female entrepreneurs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (Roomi & Harrison, 2010) found that patriarchal structures in South Asian nations hinder women entrepreneurs. Environmental constraints, according to (Krumholtz, 2009), limit job opportunities notwithstanding human desires. In contrast, recent research show that government and private sector support is boosting female entrepreneurship. (Goktan & Gupta, 2021) found that mentorship programs and incubation centers are increasing female business participation in Pakistan, improving gender-inclusive entrepreneurship.

Economic Instability and Its Impact on Entrepreneurial Intentions

Inflation and finance difficulties deterred entrepreneurs. (Welter & Smallbone, 2011) found that economic uncertainty in developing economies influences entrepreneurial growth. Financial insecurity can influence job objectives, according to (Krumboltz, 2009).

In contrast, studies in industrialized nations show that economic downturns promote entrepreneurial activity as people seek alternative income (Fairlie, 2020). In poor countries like Pakistan, weak financial support systems and excessive risk aversion hinder this tendency (Roomi & Harrison, 2010).

The Entrepreneurial Knowledge Gap and the Need for Educational Reform

Participants noted the gap between university education and entrepreneurship. (Bae et al., 2014) found that entrepreneurship education generally lacks practical business management abilities. Entrepreneurship programs should include experiential learning since Krumboltz's theory emphasizes the role of learning experiences in career development (Krumboltz, 2009).

(Rideout & Gray, 2013) question the idea that formal education leads to business success. Their findings imply that real-world business experience, mentorship, and self-learning are more important than academic preparation in entrepreneurial readiness.

Conclusion

According to theoretical and empirical viewpoints, psychological, socio-cultural, economic, and educational factors affect Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Generation Z business graduates. Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making shows how environment, role models, and personal experiences affect entrepreneurial objectives. Some of these findings are validated by research, but others demonstrate Generation Z's entrepreneurial mindset's ambition and risk aversion. Future studies should improve legislation and education to balance entrepreneurial aspiration and implementation.

Recommendations

This study offers educators, policymakers, and entrepreneurship support institutions in Pakistan and beyond some actionable insights:

Curriculum Reforms: Universities should incorporate experiential entrepreneurial education. Practical business development, digital marketing, and startup incubation modules will assist Generation Z students fill their entrepreneurial knowledge gap.

Institutional Support and Mentorship: Mentorship programs and company incubators are essential for women entrepreneurs. Public-private partnerships should fund startup training and market access.

Gender-Inclusive Policies: Establish gender-sensitive policies and showcase female entrepreneur success stories to combat socio-cultural stigmas. Law, finance, and networking may empower young women.

Digital Entrepreneurship Ecosystem: Government and financial institutions should subsidize digital entrepreneurship, encourage digital literacy, and relax e-commerce regulations.

Economic Stability Measures: Reforms in fiscal and monetary policies are crucial for lowering inflation and improving startup finance. In unstable economies, tailored loan products and tax incentives for youth-led firms can boost entrepreneurship.

Role Models and Career Counseling: Exposure to entrepreneurial role models and individualized career assistance can boost self-efficacy and entrepreneurial ambition, particularly in university career services.

The results demonstrate Generation Z's desire for independence and prudence under systemic limits. Digital platforms democratize and lower obstacles to entrepreneurship. Gender inequality and institutional support still limit inclusive business.

This study identifies socio-psychological and contextual factors that influence career pathways to enhance global youth entrepreneurship discourse, particularly in underrepresented Global South nations. Curriculum designers, economic planners, development agencies, and youth-focused groups that promote inclusive, resilient, and future-ready entrepreneurship are affected.

Future Research Directions

While this study offers in-depth insights, several avenues remain open for further exploration:

Quantitative Validation: Future studies could employ quantitative or mixed-methods designs to statistically validate the themes identified in this qualitative inquiry, enhancing generalizability across Pakistan and similar contexts.

Longitudinal Tracking: Investigating how entrepreneurial aspirations evolve post-graduation would provide a dynamic understanding of whether and how aspirations translate into business ventures over time.

Comparative Regional Studies: Cross-provincial comparisons within Pakistan or between countries in South Asia and the Middle East could reveal how varying socio-economic and cultural environments shape entrepreneurial trajectories among youth.

Digital Literacy and E-Commerce Readiness: Research is needed to evaluate the preparedness, obstacles, and training needs of youth in digital marketplaces, given the growing importance of digital entrepreneurship.

Gender-Focused Explorations: Studying female entrepreneurs' experiences, such as class, rural-urban gap, and marital status, might help identify challenges and success factors.

Policy Impact Assessment: Research on government programs like Startup Pakistan or incubation centers' impact on young entrepreneurial outcomes might inspire policy reform.

Furthering these study directions can help scholars empower the next generation of entrepreneurs to build inclusive and sustainable development.

Conclusion

This study illuminates Generation Z's entrepreneurial goals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and their complex reasons and challenges. The study used Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making to find that entrepreneurial autonomy, digital fluency, and resilience drive teenage entrepreneurship. Socio-cultural restrictions, economic volatility, and educational deficiencies moderate entrepreneurial zeal

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