

Does your age and culture shape your motivation to start a business?

Data from 13,963 potential entrepreneurs across 21 countries reveals age-culture interaction effects on self-employment motivation

TOMMASO MINOLA · GIUSEPPE CRIACO · MARTIN OBSCHONKA

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Why do some people feel drawn to entrepreneurship while others never consider it? Individual traits and economic conditions explain part of the variation, but this study points to two additional factors that are often overlooked: age and cultural context. Using data from **13,963 potential entrepreneurs across 21 countries**, the researchers examine how motivation to become self-employed changes across the lifespan—and how cultural dimensions accelerate, delay, or reshape that trajectory.

The study focuses on potential entrepreneurs—people who have not yet started a business but could under the right conditions. This allows a clearer view of what shapes motivation before action, rather than studying only those who already made the leap.

WHAT WE STUDIED

Individual-level data came from the 2012 Flash Eurobarometer survey. Cultural data came from the GLOBE project, which classifies national cultures along dimensions including uncertainty avoidance, institutional collectivism, and performance orientation. The study measured two motivational beliefs central to entrepreneurial intention: **desirability** (how appealing self-employment is) and **feasibility** (how capable the person feels about starting a business). The analytical approach tested how age relates to these beliefs, and how cultural dimensions moderate that relationship.

KEY INSIGHTS

Motivation peaks around age 22 and declines thereafter

Both desirability and feasibility follow a curved, age-related trajectory. Motivation is highest in early adulthood and gradually declines with age. This pattern holds across all 21 countries, suggesting a general life-cycle dynamic: youthful optimism and openness to risk give way to more cautious orientations as careers stabilize and responsibilities accumulate. The finding aligns with psychological theories linking early adulthood with exploration and goal pursuit.

Culture significantly alters the curve

The general age-motivation pattern exists everywhere, but culture shifts it in important ways. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures, both desirability and feasibility decline faster with age—risk-averse social norms amplify the natural decline. In institutionally collectivist cultures, young people start with lower motivation, but older adults maintain theirs longer—a buffering effect where collectivist norms delay the age-related decline. In performance-oriented cultures, individuals report lower feasibility despite strong drive—reflecting the pressure of high expectations that makes the entrepreneurial path feel less achievable.

Three distinct cultural mechanisms operate simultaneously

The study identifies three ways culture shapes the age-motivation relationship. Initial differences: cultures set different starting levels of motivation among young people. Mean-level shifts: some cultures boost or suppress motivation across all age groups. Buffering effects: certain cultural dimensions slow the age-related decline. These mechanisms demonstrate that

age-related changes in entrepreneurial motivation are not universal biological facts—they are socially constructed and culturally mediated.

TAKEAWAYS

Timing entrepreneurial interventions matters

If motivation peaks around 22, programs aimed at activating entrepreneurial potential should target that window—or deliberately work against the age-related decline in later cohorts. For family businesses managing succession across generations, understanding when motivation is naturally strongest can inform the timing of leadership transitions and new venture support.

Cultural context should shape entrepreneurship support

A one-size-fits-all approach to entrepreneurship policy or education will miss the mark. Programs in high uncertainty avoidance cultures may need to focus on building confidence and normalizing risk. In collectivist contexts, older adults may be more receptive to entrepreneurial opportunities than stereotypes suggest. Tailoring interventions to cultural realities improves their effectiveness.

IMPACT

This study bridges developmental psychology, entrepreneurship research, and cross-cultural studies

to show that entrepreneurial motivation is not a fixed trait. It evolves across the lifespan and is shaped by cultural norms in ways that have direct implications for education, policy, and business planning. The contribution is the demonstration that age and culture interact—neither alone explains the variation in entrepreneurial motivation across populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Assess entrepreneurial motivation across generations.** Use surveys or structured conversations to understand how family members and employees perceive the desirability and feasibility of entrepreneurship at different life stages.
2. **Design culturally sensitive support programs.** Entrepreneurship training and mentoring should address the specific motivational barriers that cultural context creates—whether risk aversion, feasibility doubts, or low desirability.
3. **Use motivation data to inform succession and talent strategy.** Knowing when and where entrepreneurial motivation is strongest helps identify internal champions and time leadership development investments effectively.

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CEFEO AUTHORS

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