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THE ROLE OF COMPETENCIES AND SELF-EFFICACY IN INFLUENCING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURIAL BEHAVIOR AMONG MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationships between competencies, self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour among students enrolled in Malaysian public universities. While entrepreneurship education has gained considerable attention within higher education, prior research has largely concentrated on entrepreneurial intention rather than actual behavioural engagement, resulting in limited insight into how students convert acquired knowledge and motivation into action. To address this gap, the present study adopts a behaviour-oriented perspective by examining social entrepreneurial behaviour as the central outcome of interest. A quantitative correlational research design was employed, with data collected from 358 undergraduate students who had prior exposure to entrepreneurship related courses. Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships among competencies, self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour. The results indicate that both competencies ($r = 0.69$, $p < 0.05$) and self-efficacy ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.05$) are strongly and positively associated with social entrepreneurial behaviour. Notably, self-efficacy demonstrates a slightly stronger relationship, suggesting that students' confidence in their ability to act plays a more influential role in driving behavioural engagement than competencies alone. This study contributes to the literature by moving beyond intention-based frameworks and offering a more comprehensive explanation of social entrepreneurial behaviour through the integration of capability based and psychological perspectives. The findings also provide important practical implications for higher education institutions, highlighting the need to develop both students' entrepreneurial competencies and self-efficacy to foster active and sustained engagement in social entrepreneurship.

KEYWORDS: social entrepreneurial behavior, competencies, self-efficacy, higher education Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing complexity of present-day social and economic issues has heightened the need for individuals who are not only economically capable but also socially accountable (Sachs et al., 2022). Challenges such as widening income disparities, environmental deterioration, and social exclusion demand innovative, sustainable responses that go beyond conventional market-driven solutions. Within this landscape, higher education institutions are increasingly recognised as key actors in equipping graduates with the capacity to contribute meaningfully to societal well-being (UNESCO, 2023; Leal Filho et al., 2024).

In response, entrepreneurship education has gained strategic importance as a means of developing students' skills, values, and mindsets to function as agents of positive social change (Nabi et al., 2019). A prominent area within this field is social entrepreneurship, which combines entrepreneurial processes with the objective of creating social value. Central to this process is social entrepreneurial behaviour (SEB), defined as active engagement in initiating, implementing, and sustaining activities aimed at generating social impact (Hockerts, 2017).

Despite growing institutional emphasis on entrepreneurship education, questions persist regarding the extent to which educational initiatives translate into observable behavioural engagement (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Although universities have introduced programmes such as incubators, innovation hubs, and experiential learning opportunities, empirical evidence on their effectiveness in stimulating active participation in social entrepreneurship remains mixed. This suggests a potential gap between educational efforts and actual behavioural outcomes.

One key shortcoming in the existing literature is the predominant focus on entrepreneurial intention rather than realised behaviour (Newman et al., 2024). While intention is widely acknowledged as a precursor to action, it does not invariably lead to behavioural execution (Sheeran, 2002). Consequently, reliance on intention-based frameworks may offer a partial view of social entrepreneurship, where meaningful impact ultimately depends on concrete action.

To better understand behavioural engagement, prior studies have identified competencies and self-efficacy as critical explanatory factors. Competencies encompass the knowledge and skills necessary to perform entrepreneurial tasks effectively (Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Fayolle & Liñán, 2020), whereas self-efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their capacity

to successfully carry out these tasks (Bandura, 1997). However, existing research has largely examined these constructs in relation to entrepreneurial intention rather than actual behaviour, particularly within the context of social entrepreneurship and developing economies such as Malaysia (Ismail et al., 2023; Mohd Nizam et al., 2024).

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a behaviour-focused approach by examining social entrepreneurial behaviour as the primary outcome variable. It integrates competencies and self-efficacy within a unified analytical framework to provide a more comprehensive explanation of behavioural engagement. Furthermore, by drawing on empirical data from Malaysian public universities, the study offers contextual insights from a relatively underexplored developing country setting. Accordingly, this research aims to examine the relationships between competencies, self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour among university students in Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social entrepreneurial behaviour (SEB) refers to individuals' actual engagement in activities aimed at creating social value through entrepreneurial means, including the initiation, implementation, and continuation of socially oriented projects or ventures (Hockerts, 2017; Bacq & Janssen, 2011). Unlike social entrepreneurial intention, which reflects an individual's motivational state or willingness to act, SEB represents observable actions that involve resource mobilisation, stakeholder engagement, and problem-solving in real-world contexts (Sheeran, 2002; Krueger et al., 2000). As such, SEB captures a more demanding and outcome-oriented dimension of social entrepreneurship, where value is generated through concrete behaviour rather than aspirational intent alone (Mair & Marti, 2006; Hockerts, 2017). Focusing on SEB therefore enables a more accurate assessment of students' contributions to social innovation and responds to increasing calls in the literature to move beyond intention-based explanations towards behaviour-centred analyses (Newman et al., 2024; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

2.1. *Competencies and Social Entrepreneurship Behavior*

Competencies are widely acknowledged as fundamental elements that enable individuals to function effectively within entrepreneurial environments (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). From this perspective, competencies extend beyond observable knowledge and skills to encompass deeper,

underlying attributes such as motives, values, and attitudes, which collectively shape an individual's capacity to act. In the domain of social entrepreneurship, competencies assume particular importance due to the complex and multidimensional nature of social issues, which require individuals to simultaneously integrate economic, social, and ethical considerations when developing solutions (Bacigalupo et al., 2020).

Compared with conventional entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship necessitates a broader and more multidimensional configuration of competencies. These include opportunity recognition, problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership, collaboration, and ethical judgement, all of which are essential for addressing societal challenges in a sustainable and inclusive manner (Fayolle & Liñán, 2020). Opportunity recognition enables individuals to identify unmet social needs, while problem-solving and innovative thinking support the design of context-specific solutions. Moreover, interpersonal competencies such as communication and teamwork are crucial for engaging stakeholders, coordinating collective action, and sustaining social initiatives over time (Zainudin et al., 2024).

In addition, social entrepreneurial competencies are closely linked to the ability to align social value creation with economic sustainability. This alignment requires individuals to possess not only technical and managerial competencies but also social awareness, empathy, and ethical reasoning. Such competencies allow individuals to manage competing priorities, work within resource constraints, and develop interventions that generate enduring societal impact (Cruz-Sandoval et al., 2023). Within higher education contexts, these competencies are commonly fostered through experiential and practice-oriented learning approaches, including project-based learning, service learning, and community engagement activities that expose students to real-world social challenges (Nabi et al., 2019).

Empirical studies consistently indicate that higher levels of entrepreneurial competencies are associated with increased engagement in entrepreneurial activities and innovation-driven initiatives (Fayolle & Liñán, 2020). In the context of social entrepreneurship, competencies facilitate the translation of acquired knowledge into concrete action by enhancing individuals' preparedness to initiate and sustain social ventures. Students who possess stronger competencies are better equipped to recognise opportunities, assess risks, and implement

viable solutions, thereby increasing their likelihood of engaging in social entrepreneurial behaviour (Cruz-Sandoval et al., 2023).

Despite the growing volume of research in this area, much of the existing literature has predominantly examined the role of competencies in shaping entrepreneurial intention rather than actual behavioural engagement (Newman et al., 2024). Although intention is widely regarded as a necessary antecedent of behaviour, it does not invariably lead to behavioural execution (Sheeran, 2002). This limitation is particularly salient in the context of social entrepreneurship, where the primary objective is the creation of tangible social impact through action rather than the expression of willingness alone. Consequently, there is a need for empirical investigations that extend beyond intention-based frameworks and focus more explicitly on behavioural outcomes to better understand how competencies influence actual engagement in social entrepreneurial activities.

From a theoretical standpoint, the role of competencies can be explained through Entrepreneurial Event Theory, particularly about the concept of perceived feasibility (Shapiro & Sokol, 1982). According to this theory, individuals are more inclined to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour when they perceive such actions as achievable. Competencies play a pivotal role in shaping this perception, as individuals who possess the relevant knowledge, skills, and experience tend to have greater confidence in their ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks effectively. As a result, higher levels of competencies enhance perceived feasibility, which in turn increases the likelihood of behavioural engagement.

Within higher education, the development of competencies has become a central objective of entrepreneurship education. Universities increasingly adopt experiential and competency-based learning approaches aimed at equipping students with the capabilities required to address real-world challenges (Leal Filho et al., 2024). However, the extent to which these competencies are translated into actual social entrepreneurial behaviour remains underexplored, particularly within developing country contexts such as Malaysia (Ismail et al., 2023; Mohd Nizam et al., 2024). This gap underscores the need for empirical studies that examine competencies as predictors of observable behavioural outcomes rather than focusing exclusively on intention.

Based on the foregoing discussion, competencies are posited to play a significant role in shaping

students' engagement in social entrepreneurial activities. Students who possess higher levels of competencies are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of initiating and sustaining social ventures, thereby increasing their propensity to engage in social entrepreneurial behaviour.

H1: Competencies have a significant positive relationship with social entrepreneurial behaviour.

While competencies provide the foundational capabilities required to perform social entrepreneurial tasks, they are insufficient on their own to explain why some individuals translate these capabilities into action whereas others do not. Behavioural engagement in social entrepreneurship also depends on individuals' confidence in their ability to deploy these competencies effectively, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and resource constraints (Bandura, 1997; Shapero & Sokol, 1982). Accordingly, self-efficacy is examined as a complementary psychological mechanism that activates, directs, and sustains social entrepreneurial behaviour by influencing individuals' motivation, effort, and persistence in action-oriented contexts (Bandura, 2001; Hockerts, 2017).

2.2. Self-Efficacy and Social Entrepreneurship Behavior

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to organise and perform the actions necessary to attain specific goals (Bandura, 1997). As a core construct within social cognitive theory, self-efficacy reflects not only perceived competence but also confidence in mobilising resources, managing constraints, and sustaining effort when pursuing intended outcomes. Within entrepreneurial settings, self-efficacy has been widely acknowledged as a key psychological factor influencing individuals' decision-making processes, willingness to take risks, and persistence when operating under conditions of uncertainty (Chen et al., 1998; McGee et al., 2009).

In the context of social entrepreneurship, self-efficacy assumes heightened importance due to the complexity, ambiguity, and resource limitations typically associated with addressing social problems. Unlike traditional commercial environments, social entrepreneurial initiatives often involve uncertain outcomes, competing stakeholder interests, and limited financial and institutional support. Consequently, individuals require a strong sense of confidence in their abilities to initiate, sustain, and adapt efforts aimed at creating social value. Students who possess higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of addressing societal challenges, thereby increasing

their propensity to engage in social entrepreneurial activities (Hockerts, 2017).

Beyond influencing the initiation of action, self-efficacy also plays a crucial role in determining the intensity, resilience, and continuity of effort over time. Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to demonstrate greater perseverance in the face of setbacks and are more likely to maintain engagement when confronted with obstacles or failure (Bandura, 2001). This is particularly relevant within higher education environments, where students often encounter structural and contextual barriers such as limited access to funding, insufficient prior experience, and institutional constraints. Strong self-efficacy enables students to navigate these challenges more effectively and remain involved in social innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives.

Empirical research has consistently supported the role of self-efficacy in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour. Evidence suggests that entrepreneurial self-efficacy is a significant predictor of engagement in opportunity recognition, venture creation, and innovation-oriented activities (Newman et al., 2019). Within the specific domain of social entrepreneurship, self-efficacy has been shown to influence students' participation in community-based initiatives and their ability to transform social ideas into implementable solutions (Solesvik et al., 2012). More recent scholarship further indicates that self-efficacy serves as an important mechanism linking knowledge acquisition to behavioural enactment, particularly in educational settings that emphasise experiential and practice-based learning (Bacq & Alt, 2018).

The relationship between self-efficacy and behaviour is theoretically grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that human behaviour emerges from the reciprocal interaction between personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. Within this framework, self-efficacy functions as a central cognitive mechanism that determines whether individuals initiate action, the level of effort they invest, and the extent to which they persist in the presence of difficulties (Bandura, 1997). Individuals with higher self-efficacy are therefore more inclined to set challenging goals, adopt proactive behavioural strategies, and sustain involvement in entrepreneurial activities despite uncertainty.

In social entrepreneurship education, self-efficacy is commonly developed through experiential learning methods, mentoring relationships, and exposure to authentic problem-solving contexts. Educational strategies such as project-based learning,

internships, and participation in social innovation programmes have been shown to enhance students' confidence in their ability to generate social impact (Liguori et al., 2018). Nonetheless, considerable variation in self-efficacy levels among students remains evident, suggesting that not all individuals are equally equipped to translate learning experiences into concrete entrepreneurial action.

Furthermore, although prior research has established the influence of self-efficacy on entrepreneurial intention, relatively limited empirical attention has been devoted to examining its direct effect on actual social entrepreneurial behaviour, particularly among public university students in developing countries. This gap highlights the need for further empirical investigation into how self-efficacy contributes to observable behavioural engagement rather than merely reflecting psychological readiness.

Based on the foregoing discussion, self-efficacy is posited to play a crucial role in shaping students' engagement in social entrepreneurial activities. Students who exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to initiate, sustain, and actively participate in social entrepreneurial behaviour, as they possess greater confidence in their ability to overcome challenges and achieve intended outcomes.

H2: Self-efficacy has a significant positive relationship with social entrepreneurial behaviour

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design using a correlational approach to examine the relationships between competencies, self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour among students enrolled in Malaysian public universities. A correlational design is appropriate as it allows for the systematic examination of the strength and direction of relationships among variables without manipulating the research setting or intervening experimentally (Creswell, 2014). This approach is widely utilised in social science research to explore associations among constructs in an objective and theory-driven manner (Gay et al., 2012), particularly when the aim is to test hypothesised relationships grounded in existing theoretical frameworks.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population for this study comprises undergraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities. The target population, however, focuses specifically on second year and final-year

undergraduate students who have completed entrepreneurship-related courses. This group was selected because such students are more likely to have been exposed to entrepreneurial concepts, activities, and experiential learning opportunities, making them suitable for examining social entrepreneurial behaviour (Nabi et al., 2017).

Based on data from the Ministry of Higher Education (2022), the estimated population of undergraduate students in Malaysian public universities is approximately 287,221. Given the large population size, the required sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table, which recommends a minimum of 377 respondents to achieve adequate statistical representation.

To account for potential non-response and incomplete questionnaires, 400 survey instruments were distributed in accordance with the principle of oversampling (Salkind, 2009). Of these, 358 usable responses were obtained, yielding a response rate of 89.5%, which is considered highly satisfactory for survey-based research (Babbie, 2013).

Although the final number of valid responses was slightly below the recommended threshold, the sample size remains statistically sufficient. Prior methodological guidelines suggest that a sample size exceeding 300 respondents is adequate for producing stable and reliable estimates in multivariate analyses (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, according to the recommendations of Tabachnick and Fidell (2019), the minimum sample size required for regression-based analysis is substantially lower than the sample obtained, indicating that the dataset is appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses.

3.3. Sampling Techniques

This study utilises a multistage sampling approach, combining stratified random sampling and simple random sampling. Initially, Malaysian public universities were stratified into three categories: Research Universities, Comprehensive Universities, and Focused Universities. This stratification was employed to ensure proportional representation across different institutional types and to minimise sampling bias (Creswell, 2012). Subsequently, simple random sampling was conducted within each stratum to select respondents from the pool of second year and final-year undergraduate students. This method ensures that each eligible student had an equal probability of selection, thereby enhancing the representativeness and generalisability of the findings (Lay & Khoo, 2016).

3.4. Instrumentation

Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire consisting of three sections. Section A collected demographic information using seven items developed by the researcher. Section B measured competencies using 29 items adapted from established instruments, capturing dimensions related to knowledge, skills, and motivation (Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Liñán, 2008). Section C assessed self-efficacy using 13 items adapted from the Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy Scale (Urban, 2013), which measures respondents' confidence in performing entrepreneurial-related tasks. Section D measured entrepreneurial intention (*tekad*) using eight items adapted from the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire (EIQ) developed by Liñán and Chen (2009). Section E measured social entrepreneurial behaviour using 10 items adapted from prior empirical studies, focusing on respondents' engagement in social innovation initiatives and community-based entrepreneurial activities (Solesvik *et al.*, 2012). All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale is widely used in social science research due to its reliability, ease of administration, and suitability for statistical analysis (Pallant, 2020).

3.5. Reliability and Validity

The measurement instruments employed in this study were adapted from well-established scales, thereby ensuring content validity. Content validity was further reinforced through expert review, during which subject-matter experts evaluated the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the measurement items. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The results indicate that all constructs demonstrate good to excellent reliability, with alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, competencies recorded an alpha value of 0.95, self-efficacy 0.91, entrepreneurial intention 0.88, and social entrepreneurial behaviour 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency across all constructs.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data collected through the questionnaire were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarise respondents' demographic profiles. Subsequently, Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the linear relationships between competencies, self-

efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour. Pearson correlation analysis is appropriate for assessing the strength and direction of relationships between continuous variables in social science research (Pallant, 2020). The correlation coefficient (r) was used to indicate relationship strength, while p -values were employed to assess statistical significance. The interpretation of correlation magnitudes followed the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988) and Pallant (2020), where values of 0.10–0.29 indicate weak relationships, 0.30–0.49 moderate relationships, and values 0.50 and above strong relationships.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Demographic Profile Respondents

A total of 358 respondents were included in the final analysis. An examination of respondents' demographic characteristics provides an overview of the sample composition and demonstrates the adequacy of the data for subsequent analysis. With respect to gender, female students constituted the larger proportion of the sample, accounting for 64.8% ($n = 232$) of respondents, while 35.2% ($n = 126$) were male. This distribution indicates a higher level of female participation in the study. In terms of institutional affiliation, most respondents were enrolled in research universities, representing 69.8% ($n = 250$) of the sample. This was followed by students from comprehensive universities (21.8%, $n = 78$) and focused universities (6.7%, $n = 24$). The predominance of respondents from research-oriented institutions suggests that a substantial portion of the sample was drawn from environments characterised by strong academic and innovation-related activities. Regarding academic background, respondents were drawn from a wide range of fields of study. The largest group comprised students from other disciplines (42.7%, $n = 153$), followed by arts and social sciences (38.0%, $n = 136$), science-based programmes (13.4%, $n = 48$), and technical or engineering fields (5.9%, $n = 21$). This diversity reflects a multidisciplinary sample and enhances the potential generalisability of the findings across academic domains. In relation to family entrepreneurial background, a substantial majority of respondents reported that they did not originate from entrepreneurial families (83.2%, $n = 298$), whereas only 16.5% ($n = 59$) indicated having such a background. Despite this, a relatively high proportion of respondents (69.0%, $n = 247$) reported prior business experience. This suggests that exposure to entrepreneurial activities among students may be influenced by factors beyond family

background, such as education or personal initiative.

Furthermore, 59.8% (n = 214) of respondents indicated that they were familiar with the concept of social entrepreneurship, while 40.2% (n = 144) reported no prior awareness. In a similar vein, 52.5% (n = 188) of respondents stated that they had participated in activities or programmes related to social entrepreneurship, whereas 46.9% (n = 168) had not. These findings point to a moderate level of awareness and involvement in social entrepreneurship within the sample.

A detailed summary of respondents' demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile for Respondents.

| Variable | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|--|------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 126 | 35.2 |
| | Female | 232 | 64.8 |
| Type of University | Research | 250 | 69.8 |
| | Comprehensive | 78 | 21.8 |
| | Focused | 24 | 6.7 |
| Field of Study | Science | 48 | 13.4 |
| | Art and Social Science | 136 | 38.0 |
| | Technical/Engineering | 21 | 5.9 |
| | Others | 153 | 42.7 |
| Family Entrepreneurial Background | Entrepreneur | 59 | 16.5 |
| | Non-Entrepreneur | 298 | 83.2 |
| Business Experience | Yes | 247 | 69 |
| | No | 108 | 30.2 |
| Awareness of Social Entrepreneurship | Yes | 214 | 59.8 |
| | No | 144 | 40.2 |
| Participation in Social Entrepreneurship | Yes | 188 | 52.5 |
| | No | 168 | 46.9 |

4.2. Correlation Analysis Result

Pearson's product moment correlation analysis was performed to assess the linear associations between competencies, self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour among students in Malaysian public universities. This statistical technique allows for the examination of both the magnitude and direction of relationships between continuous variables. The findings reveal that competencies exhibit a positive and statistically significant relationship with social entrepreneurial behaviour (r = 0.69, p < 0.05). This result indicates that students who report higher levels of competencies tend to demonstrate greater engagement in social entrepreneurial behaviour.

Based on established interpretation criteria (Cohen, 1988; Pallant, 2020), the observed correlation coefficient reflects a strong association, suggesting a meaningful relationship between competencies and behavioural engagement. Similarly, self-efficacy is positively and significantly correlated with social entrepreneurial behaviour (r = 0.72, p < 0.05). The strength of this relationship is also classified as strong, indicating that students with higher confidence in their ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks are more likely to participate actively in social entrepreneurial activities. A comparison of the correlation coefficients shows that the association between self-efficacy and social entrepreneurial behaviour is marginally stronger than that between competencies and social entrepreneurial behaviour. This pattern suggests that psychological factors – particularly individuals' beliefs in their own capabilities – may exert a slightly greater influence on behavioural engagement than competency-related factors alone. Overall, the results demonstrate that both competencies and self-efficacy are strongly and positively associated with social entrepreneurial behaviour. Higher levels of these factors correspond with increased behavioural engagement in social entrepreneurship. Accordingly, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are supported. A summary of the correlation analysis findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis.

| Variable | Social Entrepreneurship | r | Sig | Strength |
|---------------|-------------------------|------|------|----------|
| Competencies | SE | 0.69 | 0.00 | Strong |
| Self-Efficacy | SE | 0.72 | 0.00 | Strong |

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Competencies and Social Entrepreneurship Behavior

The results demonstrate that competencies are strongly and significantly associated with social entrepreneurial behaviour, indicating that students who possess higher levels of entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and capabilities are more likely to engage actively in socially oriented initiatives. This finding lends empirical support to the argument in the existing literature that competencies function as essential foundational capacities that enable individuals to identify opportunities, develop appropriate solutions, and implement social initiatives effectively. Consistent with prior research, competencies facilitate the conversion of cognitive and technical resources into tangible actions, particularly in contexts characterised by innovation demands, complex problem-solving, and adaptive

decision-making processes (Fayolle & Liñán, 2020; Cruz-Sandoval *et al.*, 2023).

Beyond providing functional and technical abilities, competencies also enhance individuals' ability to operate within the complex and uncertain environments that commonly characterise social entrepreneurship. Students with well-developed competencies are better equipped to analyse social issues, mobilise available resources, and coordinate collaboration among stakeholders, thereby increasing their readiness to participate in meaningful social entrepreneurial activities. This finding aligns with previous studies emphasising the role of competency-based education in narrowing the gap between knowledge acquisition and actual behavioural enactment (Nabi *et al.*, 2019; Leal Filho *et al.*, 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings can be interpreted through the lens of Entrepreneurial Event Theory, which identifies perceived feasibility as a central driver of entrepreneurial action. Competencies contribute directly to this perception by strengthening individuals' confidence in their ability to perform entrepreneurial tasks successfully (Shapiro & Sokol, 1982). In this regard, students who possess higher levels of competencies are more likely to view social entrepreneurial activities as attainable and manageable, thereby increasing their likelihood of behavioural engagement. This suggests that competencies should not be viewed merely as static attributes, but rather as dynamic enablers that shape individuals' self-perceptions and action readiness.

Moreover, the magnitude of the observed relationship indicates that competencies play a substantial role in influencing behavioural engagement, particularly within educational contexts that emphasise experiential learning and exposure to real-world problem-solving situations. The results are consistent with existing empirical evidence showing that individuals with higher entrepreneurial competencies tend to exhibit more proactive involvement in innovation-driven and socially oriented initiatives (Cruz-Sandoval *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that competencies alone are not sufficient to fully explain behavioural engagement, as such behaviour is also shaped by psychological and contextual factors.

Overall, the findings highlight competencies as a critical determinant of social entrepreneurial behaviour, particularly in facilitating the transition from knowledge and skill development to real-world action. This underscores the importance for higher education institutions to prioritise competency development as a strategic approach to fostering

students' active engagement in social entrepreneurship.

5.2. Self-Efficacy and Social Entrepreneurship Behavior

The findings further indicate that self-efficacy exhibits a strong, and marginally stronger, association with social entrepreneurial behaviour than competencies, underscoring the pivotal role of students' confidence in driving behavioural engagement. This result reinforces the argument presented in Section 2.2 that behavioural outcomes are not determined solely by individuals' capabilities, but also by their belief in their ability to deploy those capabilities effectively. In essence, the possession of knowledge and skills alone may be insufficient to stimulate action unless individuals also have the confidence to apply these competencies within real-world social contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding is well aligned with Social Cognitive Theory, which posits self-efficacy as a central cognitive mechanism shaping human behaviour. According to this framework, individuals with higher self-efficacy are more inclined to initiate action, exert greater effort, and persist when confronted with challenges and setbacks (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2001). Within the realm of social entrepreneurship where initiatives are frequently characterised by uncertainty, limited resources, and complex social issues self-efficacy becomes especially critical in sustaining engagement and enabling individuals to navigate obstacles effectively.

The strength of the relationship observed in this study suggests that self-efficacy may function as a more proximal predictor of behavioural engagement than competencies. This interpretation is consistent with prior empirical evidence demonstrating that entrepreneurial self-efficacy significantly influences individuals' involvement in opportunity recognition, venture creation, and innovation-oriented activities (Newman *et al.*, 2019). In the context of social entrepreneurship, self-efficacy has similarly been shown to enhance individuals' willingness to participate in community-based initiatives and to translate socially oriented ideas into implementable actions (Solesvik *et al.*, 2012). Collectively, these findings suggest that self-efficacy plays a critical role in bridging the gap between intention formation and actual behavioural execution.

Moreover, the present findings lend support to the proposition that self-efficacy acts as a key psychological driver that both activates and sustains behavioural engagement. While competencies

provide the structural and technical foundation necessary for entrepreneurial action, self-efficacy influences whether individuals are prepared to take the initial step and remain committed throughout the entrepreneurial process. Students with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to interpret challenges as manageable rather than prohibitive, thereby enhancing their resilience and adaptability in pursuing social entrepreneurial activities. This dynamic is particularly salient within higher education settings, where students often encounter barriers such as limited experience, constrained resources, and institutional limitations.

Importantly, the slightly stronger relationship observed for self-efficacy relative to competencies highlights the significance of psychological readiness in shaping behaviour. The findings suggest that even when students possess adequate competencies, behavioural engagement may remain limited if confidence in one's ability to act is lacking. This pattern supports the view that participation in social entrepreneurship is not merely a function of capability but is also influenced by underlying cognitive belief systems that guide decision-making and action (Bacq & Alt, 2018).

Overall, the results underscore the importance of self-efficacy as a key determinant of social entrepreneurial behaviour, particularly in enabling students to translate competencies into meaningful and sustained action. This highlights the need for higher education institutions to design educational interventions that not only build competencies, but also strengthen students' confidence through experiential learning, mentoring, and exposure to real-world problem-solving environments. By cultivating self-efficacy alongside technical capabilities, universities can play a vital role in fostering sustained engagement in social entrepreneurship among students.

Importantly, the findings indicate that self-efficacy demonstrates a marginally stronger association with social entrepreneurial behaviour than competencies, suggesting that psychological readiness may exert a more immediate influence on behavioural engagement than capability alone. This supports the theoretical proposition advanced in the literature that, although competencies are necessary for entrepreneurial action, they are insufficient on their own to fully explain why individuals translate capability into behaviour.

The joint consideration of competencies and self-efficacy offers a more comprehensive explanation of social entrepreneurial behaviour, highlighting that behaviour emerges from the interaction between

what individuals can do and what they believe they can accomplish. In this regard, competencies function as an enabling foundation by equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills required for action, whereas self-efficacy operates as an activating mechanism that converts potential capability into actual engagement. This interactional perspective reinforces the argument that behavioural engagement is shaped not only by structural capacity, but also by individuals' confidence in their ability to act under conditions of uncertainty.

By integrating these constructs, the present study contributes to the literature by addressing the limitations of fragmented and intention focused approaches that dominate social entrepreneurship research. In line with recent calls to advance behaviour centred explanations, the findings demonstrate that both capability development and psychological readiness must be considered simultaneously to better understand students' engagement in social entrepreneurial activities (Newman et al., 2024; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the associations between competencies, self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour among students enrolled in Malaysian public universities. The results reveal that both competencies and self-efficacy are positively and significantly related to social entrepreneurial behaviour, indicating that effective engagement is shaped by a combination of skills and personal confidence. Importantly, self-efficacy exhibits a marginally stronger relationship, suggesting that students are more inclined to participate in social entrepreneurial initiatives when they not only possess relevant knowledge and abilities but also feel confident in applying them within practical settings. This finding highlights the pivotal role of psychological preparedness in initiating and sustaining social entrepreneurial actions. In sum, the findings indicate that encouraging social entrepreneurial behaviour necessitates an integrated approach that simultaneously strengthens competencies and enhances self-efficacy. While competencies form the basis for action, self-efficacy serves as the catalyst that enables these capabilities to be effectively translated into consistent and meaningful engagement.

6.1. Theoretical Contribution

This study offers several important theoretical contributions to the social entrepreneurship

literature. First, it advances existing scholarship by moving beyond a predominant emphasis on entrepreneurial intention and focusing instead on actual social entrepreneurial behaviour, thereby providing a more behaviour-driven and action-oriented perspective. Second, the study brings together competencies and self-efficacy within a single conceptual framework, demonstrating that social entrepreneurial behaviour is jointly influenced by individuals' capabilities and their confidence to act. In doing so, it addresses a key gap in prior research that has often examined these constructs independently. Third, by presenting empirical evidence from Malaysian public universities the study contributes valuable contextual insights from a developing country setting. This contextualisation extends the applicability of existing theoretical models and supports a more inclusive understanding of social entrepreneurship across diverse socio-economic environments.

6.2. Implications

The results yield meaningful practical implications for higher education institutions aiming to foster social entrepreneurial behaviour among students. First, the significant impact of competencies indicates the importance of shifting beyond conventional classroom-based instruction towards more experiential and practice-oriented pedagogies, such as project-based learning, service-learning initiatives, and community-based engagement. These methods provide students with opportunities to apply knowledge in real-world contexts by identifying social challenges and developing viable solutions. Second, the prominent

role of self-efficacy highlights the necessity of cultivating students' confidence in parallel with skill development. Educational institutions should therefore integrate mentoring programmes, hands-on experiences, and structured reflective activities to reinforce students' psychological preparedness for social entrepreneurial action. Taken together, the findings emphasise that sustained participation in social entrepreneurship is best supported through a holistic approach that simultaneously strengthens relevant competencies and enhances self-efficacy.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

Notwithstanding its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of the research design restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions about the associations among competencies, self-efficacy, and social entrepreneurial behaviour. Future investigations could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish causal directions. Second, reliance on self-reported measures may expose the findings to common method variance and social desirability bias. Subsequent research is therefore encouraged to triangulate data using alternative sources, such as objective behavioural indicators or qualitative methods, to strengthen the validity of the results. Finally, the emphasis on students from Malaysian public universities may constrain the broader applicability of the findings. Future studies could enhance generalisability by examining diverse institutional settings and cultural contexts, as well as incorporating additional individual-level or environmental variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

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