LongDbName: EconLit
ShortDbName: ecn
AN: 2172349
Title: How Does Entrepreneurial Role Model Connect to Entrepreneurial Perceptions: The Moderating Role of Psychological Distance
PublicationDate: 20241001
Contributors: Zhao, Haiyuan; Jiang, Hui; Fang, Qinyi; Weng, Qingxiong;
DocTypes: Journal Article;
PubTypes:
CoverDate: October 2024
PeerReviewed: true
Source: Entrepreneurship Research Journal
IsiType: JOUR
DOIDS: ;
ISBNS: ;
ISSNS: 2194-6175; 2157-5665;
PublisherLocations: ;
RecordType: ARTICLES
BookEdition:
Publisher:
PageStart: 1975
PageEnd: 2000
PageCount: 26
Volume: 14
Issue: 4
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Language: eng
Subjects: Entrepreneurship; Industrialization; Manufacturing and Service Industries; Choice of Technology; Socialist and Transitional Economies: Factor and Product Markets; Industry Studies; Population;
plink: https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=e64c6f98-6689-37b5-ab8d-837253ec85d0

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How Does Entrepreneurial Role Model Connect to Entrepreneurial Perceptions: The Moderating Role of Psychological Distance

https://doi.org/10.1515/erj-2019-0284
Received October 10, 2019; accepted March 6, 2023

Abstract: The influence of entrepreneurial role models on individuals could be regarded as a social learning process. However, we still lack an in-depth understanding of under what conditions the impacts of entrepreneurial role models are stronger or weaker. This paper draws on social learning theory and construal level theory to explore how entrepreneurial role models relate to individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions under different psychological distance dimensions. A representative sample of 322 final-year students from nine universities in China was analyzed. The results demonstrated that entrepreneurial role model was positively associated with feasibility and desirability perceptions. Further, we found that the spatial distance and social distance as boundary conditions, respectively, moderated the main effects. This study extends prior research on the functions of entrepreneurial role model by providing a psychological distance perspective.

Keywords: role model, entrepreneurship, psychological distance

1 Introduction

Entrepreneurial role model, which litters with stories, successes, and references, as valid stimulation and inspiration, has become a familiar phenomenon in entrepreneurship (Bosma et al. 2011). Numerous entrepreneurs claim that their decisions to engage in entrepreneurship are primarily inspired by their entrepreneurial role models (Byrne, Fattoum, and Diaz 2018; Chlosta et al. 2012). However, the influence of entrepreneurial role model might not always be positive and strong (Mungai and

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Velamuri 2011; Zapkau, Schwens, and Kabst 2017), and it even could trigger a deterrence of entrepreneurship (Wyrwich, Stuetzer, and Sternberg 2016). In other words, the extent of influence of entrepreneurial role models on individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions varies (Krueger 1993), which are core drivers in the formation of entrepreneurial intention (Fitzsimmons and Douglas 2011; Khoi et al. 2021; Krueger, Reilly, and Carsrud 2000; Schlaegel and Koenig 2014). Therefore, further exploring the potential relationship between entrepreneurial role models and individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions is essential (Contín-Pilart and Larraza-Kintana 2015; Laviolette, Lefebvre, and Brunel 2012).

Prior research across management disciplines from various theoretical perspectives have examined the vital existence of entrepreneurial role model. Specifically, researches from the theory of planned behavior (TPB) state that exogenous impacts (e.g., entrepreneurial role models) are indirectly acting on individuals' entrepreneurial intention by affecting their perceived behavioral control (Al-Jubari, Hassan, and Liñán 2019; Liñán and Chen 2009; Santos, Roomi, and Liñán 2014). However, researchers who adopt the social cognitive career theory view argue that entrepreneurial role models can increase individuals' entrepreneurial career preferences by improving their self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Chlosta et al. 2012; Lanero, Vázquez, and Aza 2016; Van Auken et al. 2006). In addition, some researchers not only verify that entrepreneurial role models promote individuals' entrepreneurial passion through emotional diffusion (Soleimanof, Morris, and Jang 2021; Türk, Zapkau, and Schwens 2020) but also declare that such entrepreneurial role models reduce individuals' fear of entrepreneurial failure via demonstration effect and legitimization effect (Wyrwich, Stuetzer, and Sternberg 2016). In essence, these researches are highly compatible and contend that entrepreneurial role models are critical in shaping individuals' attitudes towards entrepreneurship.

Although prior studies underline the incentive functions of entrepreneurial role models to encourage individuals to be entrepreneurs, the learning functions of observing role models have not been fully explored (Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017). As Gibson (2004) states, one of role models' most important functions is to provide learning sources for individuals. Therefore, based on social learning theory, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the underlying mechanism of entrepreneurial role model's learning function. Social learning theory (Bandura 1977) points out that observing role models promotes individuals' learning which further influences their perceptions and attitudes. Several studies have applied social learning theory to explain the role of entrepreneurial role models in promoting individuals' propensity to become self-employed (Mungai and Velamuri 2011). Specifically, entrepreneurial role models positively relate to individuals' entrepreneurial self-efficacy, entrepreneurial passion (Türk, Zapkau, and Schwens

2020), and entrepreneurial intention (Austin and Nauta 2015). Nevertheless, these studies have not addressed the question of what are the specific learning tasks associated with observing entrepreneurial role models and how (i.e., in which functions) their experiences get translated into the entrepreneurial perceptions among individuals (Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017). Previous researchers proposed that perceived feasibility and desirability, as two special entrepreneurial perceptional factors, are vital antecedents that predict entrepreneurial intention (Esfandiar et al. 2019; Krueger 1993; Krueger, Reilly, and Carsrud 2000). Thus, we hypothesize that entrepreneurial role models facilitate individuals to perceive entrepreneurship as a desirable and feasible activity.

Furthermore, previous studies predominantly emphasized that there are different effects of learning from entrepreneurial role models when there are significant differences between entrepreneurial role models and individuals, such as gender heterogeneity (Byrne, Fattoum, and Diaz 2018; Chlosta et al. 2012; Hoffmann, Junge, and Malchow-Møller 2015; Laviolette, Lefebvre, and Brunel 2012; Parker and Van Praag 2006; Santos, Roomi, and Liñán 2014). However, these studies neglect the fact that individuals are embedded in a social context which also impacts the ongoing learning process. Specifically, they ignored that the psychological distances (e.g., temporal, spatial, and social distance) with entrepreneurial role models are associated with individuals' entrepreneurial opportunity recognition, evaluation, and exploitation (Chen et al. 2018; Tumasjan, Welpe, and Spörrle 2013). Based on construal level theory, we examine the functions of psychological distance in entrepreneurial role models' effectiveness to fill this gap. Construal level theory (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2010; Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007) argues that psychological distance affects individuals' construal level to others or things that consequently shape their perceptions and evaluations. With the increase of psychological distance, individuals perceive things shift from a low construal level which is concrete, specific, and captures the context-specific features that lead to feasibility concerns, to a high construal level which is abstract, global, and captures the central aspects that lead to desirability concerns (Soderberg et al. 2015; Trope and Liberman 2010). Meanwhile, learning behaviors (e.g., learning from an entrepreneurial role model) may be construed at different cognitive levels in accordance with psychological distance (Bosma et al. 2011; Chen, Ding, and Li 2016). Individuals have different psychological distances from their entrepreneurial role models, which would influence individuals to learn from them at different construal levels and shape individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions. Hence, we posit that psychological distance moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial perceptions.

Taken together, based on social learning theory (Bandura 1977) and construal level theory (Trope and Liberman 2010), we seek to make contributions to current

literature in three aspects. First, we explore how entrepreneurial role models relate to entrepreneurial perceptions by regarding the function of entrepreneurial role models as a social learning process that responds to the call by Gibson (2004) and Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton (2017). By elaborating on the specific learning tasks and learning mechanisms from entrepreneurial role model, we further explain the underlying mechanism of entrepreneurial role model's effectiveness that enrich prior studies which highlight the inspiring function of entrepreneurial role models (BarNir, Watson, and Hutchins 2011; Nowinski and Haddoud 2019). Second, the literature has predominantly assumed isolated factors (e.g., gender and race) that result in various role models' influence (Bosma et al. 2011; Byrne, Fattoum, and Diaz 2018; Laviolette, Lefebvre, and Brunel 2012; Wyrwich, Stuetzer, and Sternberg 2016). We discover the moderating effect of psychological distance on the association between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial perceptions, which emphasizes the interaction between role model and individuals, extending prior research on entrepreneurial role models. Third, we distinguish the different roles of two dimensions of psychological distance in the process of connecting entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial perceptions. This effort expands the application of construal level theory in early-stage entrepreneurship research (Chen et al. 2018; Davidsson and Honig 2003; Fujita et al. 2006; Santos, Neumeyer, and Morris 2019).

This article proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature and demonstrate the learning mechanism of entrepreneurial role model to predict entrepreneurial perceptions. Then, we discuss the specific arguments about the moderating role of psychological distance. In the subsequent sections, we describe our methodology and results. Next, we declare our findings, theoretical implication, and practical implications. Finally, we draw limitations and future research directions.

2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

An entrepreneurial role model is thought to be an individual who sets noteworthy example for others and inspires or warns other individuals to make certain business decisions and actions (Bosma et al. 2011). Previous studies show that observing entrepreneurial role models, such as parents (Canovi et al. 2022; Hoffmann, Junge, and Malchow-Møller 2015; Mungai and Velamuri 2011), peer groups (Falck, Heblich, and Luedemann 2012), and colleagues (Kacperczyk 2013; Nanda and Sørensen 2010) could increase individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions and promote individuals regard entrepreneurship as a "*credible*" activity (Nowinski and Haddoud 2019). Concretely, credibility depends on desirability perception and feasibility perception in the entrepreneurial event model (MEE) (Shapero and Sokol 1982); the former

refers to the new venture being attractive enough, while the latter corresponds to entrepreneurship being under control. The process of how individuals perceive the credibility of entrepreneurial role models can be explained through social learning theory (Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017).

2.1 Entrepreneurial Role Model and Entrepreneurial Perceptions

Entrepreneurial role model provides simulation entrepreneurial practice and foresight for individuals to observe and imitate. According to social learning theory (Bandura and Richard 1977; Bandura 1997), role models help individuals learn themselves and specific new skills through observational learning. One of the primary learning contents is "*mental learning,*" which shapes individuals' system of values and beliefs and arouses their entrepreneurial passions and spirits. For instance, being exposed to entrepreneurial family members boots individuals' entrepreneurial ambition (Canovi et al. 2022), and an individual with entrepreneurial parents is more likely to become self-employed (Saeed, Muffatto, and Yousafzai 2014).

An excellent entrepreneurial role model promotes individuals to learn a desirable vocational view and outlook on life. Previous studies have demonstrated that entrepreneurial role models serve as "*orientation guides*" to enhance individuals' desirable perceptions by drawing excellent career prospects. For example, increased numbers of housewives started to be self-employed by following famous female entrepreneurial role models to be autarkical and be regarded as "*women of the new era*" (Byrne, Fattoum, and Diaz 2018). Besides, modeling exposure also can produce positive emotional responses and help individuals learn to define their self-concept (Nowinski and Haddoud 2019; Wang, Wang, and Chen 2018). Especially when entrepreneurial role models occupy high social and economic status, individuals' propensity to become self-employed will be higher (Mungai and Velamuri 2011).

Moreover, an entrepreneurial role model creates a stronger entrepreneurial atmosphere for individuals. Prior studies found that developing entrepreneurial cultures in the local environment where individuals are embedded could facilitate them to decide to start entrepreneurship (Boudreaux, Nikolaev, and Klein 2019; Mueller 2006). Specifically, role model conveys positive entrepreneurial value to individuals (Schmutzler, Andonova, and Diaz-Serrano 2019), especially in high-approval regions (Wyrwich, Stuetzer, and Sternberg 2016). Under such circumstance, individuals could know how the country/society view entrepreneurship,

which facilitates them to perceive desirable to choose entrepreneurship as their ideal career (Boudreaux, Nikolaev, and Klein 2019; Liñán, Urbano, and Guerrero 2011). Thus, we propose that entrepreneurial role models increase individuals' entrepreneurial desirability perceptions.

H1: Entrepreneurial role model is positively related to entrepreneurial desirability perception.

Another learning content when being exposed to entrepreneurial role models is "*practical learning*," which provides a scenario simulation and increases individuals' confidence to achieve their business goals. In other words, observing entrepreneurial role models provide living evidence for individuals' that their goals are achievable.

A vital function of direct observation of entrepreneurial role model is learning how to be an entrepreneur (Minniti and Bygrave 2001; Wang and Chugh 2015). The student entrepreneurship club is a good example to understand. Serving as the resource of entrepreneurial learning inspiration inside the club, entrepreneurial role models share their precious experiences and answer various questions, such as entrepreneurial procedures and systems (e.g., production, human resource, marketing, and finance) (Boldureanu et al. 2020; Nauta and Kokaly 2001). At the same time, students could also obtain practical support and advice from entrepreneurial role models (e.g., mentors) in the entrepreneurial curriculums (Boldureanu et al. 2020; Bonesso et al. 2018; Gieure, Benavides-Espinosa, and Roig-Dobón 2019; Nauta and Kokaly 2001). Through tacit knowledge learning and substantial support, individuals could learn factors that lead to business success and ultimately increase their entrepreneurial feasibility perceptions.

Entrepreneurial role model also facilitates individuals to learn about possible difficulties and challenges. This form of learning enables individuals to develop an "*early warning system*," which provides visualization and anticipation for the future (Lévesque, Minniti, and Shepherd 2009; Bonesso et al. 2018). For example, knowing an entrepreneurial role model reduces an individual's fear of failure (Vaillant and Lafuente 2007). In other words, an entrepreneurial role model makes entrepreneurship looks achievable. Moreover, learning from positive entrepreneurial role model reduces individuals' fear of uncertainty and increases the sense of "*if he/she can do it, I can, too*" (Kong, Zhao, and Tsai 2020; Liu, Ma, and Li 2019; Nowinski and Haddoud 2019). Therefore, we propose that entrepreneurial role models increase individuals' entrepreneurial feasibility perceptions.

H2: Entrepreneurial role model is positively related to entrepreneurial feasibility perception.

2.2 Moderating Effects of Psychological Distance

Social learning requires connecting with others rather than the self (Kalkstein et al. 2016), and learning effectiveness is more associated with the social distance and the space distance between entrepreneurial role models and individuals (Bosma et al. 2011; Chen, Ding, and Li 2016). Construal level theory perspective (Trope and Liberman 2010) suggests that the temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and hypotheticality (i.e., the distinction between real and imagined objects and between probable and improbable events) refer to the psychological distance an object or action can remove from the point (i.e., the egocentric here and now). In addition, psychological distance increases as the object or action become further removed from the reference point (Liberman and Trope 2008). Any object or action can be construed at different levels, from high to low. The high-level construal is abstract, global, and captures the central aspects, while the low-level construal is concrete, specific, and captures the peripheral features (Hallam et al. 2016; Trope and Liberman 2010). For example, a high-level construal of learning can be described abstractly as "*obtaining a great score*"; on the other hand, a low-level construal of learning can be described concretely as "*reading a book.*" In addition, construal level theory argues that desirability constitutes a high-level construal, while feasibility constitutes a low-level construal (Liberman and Trope 1998; Soderberg et al. 2015). Generally speaking, some role models have a short distance from individuals and are associated with a low-level construal, while others are farther away and related to a high-level construal (Fujita et al. 2006).

2.2.1 The Moderating Effects of Spatial Distance

Following Trope and Liberman (2010), we conceptualize spatial distance as the perceived space between entrepreneurial role models and individuals. It is the subjective perception of the actual location where entrepreneurial role models are and associated with common cognitive representation, social norms, frequency of interaction, and communication that influence what individuals have learned and the learning effectiveness (Lafuente, Vaillant, and Rialp 2007; Wyrwich, Sternberg, and Stuetzer 2018).

Having entrepreneurial role models with relatively remote spatial distance promotes more abstract learning at a higher-level construal, increasing individuals' entrepreneurial desirability perceptions. First, individuals learn from entrepreneurial role models with distant spaces by image descriptions instead of concrete details (Radu and Loué 2008). First, such entrepreneurial role model generally comes from low-interaction and low-connection observations (e.g., news interviews),

emphasizing more abstract information about the primary entrepreneurship goals, such as lofty work meaning or tremendous outcome value (Santos, Neumeyer, and Morris 2019). For instance, when observing a famous successful entrepreneur in the United States, individuals in Asia may focus more on the tremendous benefits after success and are more attracted to these benefits. Moreover, the distant spatial icon may provide more mental support than practical support to help individuals explore new horizons (Liu, Ma, and Li 2019). These supports facilitate individuals to design a bright entrepreneurial future and increase their desirability perceptions. Second, individuals are likely to focus more on the business details of spatially close entrepreneurial role models. For example, they highlight entrepreneurial role models' constraints, personal sacrifices, and prices behind entrepreneurial success (Douglas and Shepherd 2000, 2002). However, more attention on "*process*" rather than "*outcome*" may weaken rather than intensify individuals' entrepreneurial desirability perception via observing spatially close entrepreneurial role models (Zellweger, Sieger, and Halter 2011). Thus, we propose that when individuals have a distant spatial distance from their entrepreneurial role models, the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and individuals' perceived desirability becomes stronger.

H3: Spatial distance moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception. The relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception becomes stronger when spatial distance is distant rather than close.

In contrast, having entrepreneurial role models with relatively close spatial distance facilitates learning with more concrete features at a lower-level construal that increase individuals' entrepreneurial feasibility perceptions. Living inside one geographical region facilitates the frequency and intensity of interaction between entrepreneurial role models and individuals, strengthening the transmission of tacit knowledge (Davidsson and Honig 2003) and providing more actual information, support, and guidance for starting a business (Austin and Nauta 2015). Furthermore, daily close observational learning results in more precise action-by-action imitation (Genschow et al. 2019; Hansen, Alves, and Trope 2016). For example, Fen and Saul (2015) found that sharing the same dormitory positively influenced alumni engagement as migrant entrepreneurs. That means more detailed content individuals could learn through entrepreneurial role models with close spatial distances, such as how to find employees, what kind of advertisement is attractive, or where is a potential customer. In other words, spatially close entrepreneurial role models inspire individuals' perceptions that starting a business is feasible by clearly showing and conveying how to obtain future achievements of business venturing. Therefore, we propose that when entrepreneurial

role models and individuals have a close spatial distance, the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and perceived entrepreneurial feasibility becomes stronger.

H4: Spatial distance moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception. The relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception becomes stronger when spatial distance is close rather than distant.

2.2.2 The Moderating Effects of Social Distance

According to Trope and Liberman (2010), social distance is conceptualized as the perceived social isolation between entrepreneurial role models and individuals. In short, it is a subjective perception of how similar are entrepreneurial role models to individuals. Social learning occurs from both proximal vivid models and distant symbolic models. Empirical evidence suggests that social distance is associated with objective similarity (e.g., gender and race) and perceived similarity (e.g., perspectives and values), and it plays a critical role in explaning the extent of learning from observation (Ensher and Murphy 1997; Marx and Ko 2012).

As construal level theory proposed, under further social distance situations, individuals perceive objects or actions more abstractly at high-level construal (Trope and Liberman 2010). Social learning from distant objects accompanies by extracting aspects of another's behavior that will remain stable (Kalkstein et al. 2016), and individuals socially distant from their role models may engage in prolonged abstract activities (e.g., thinking) rather than concrete activities (e.g., doing) (Chen et al. 2018). That means individuals with a distant social distance from entrepreneurial role models in various contexts will be attracted more to the entrepreneurial desirability aspect and learn more about the common experiences and universal disciplines of entrepreneurship. Thus, we propose that when entrepreneurial role models and individuals have a distant social distance, the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and perceived entrepreneurial desirability becomes stronger.

H5: Social distance moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception. The relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception becomes stronger when social distance is distant rather than close.

On the other hand, entrepreneurial role models influence individuals more specifically (i.e., low-level construal), especially when they show a high degree of

resemblance. Previous research shows that individuals are able to learn certain skills or competencies when they are attracted to entrepreneurial role models who are perceived as similar in terms of characteristics, behavior, goals, and ethnicity (Bosma et al. 2011; Liñán, Urbano, and Guerrero 2011). For example, learning the practice and behavior from similarly like-minded peers helps individuals contextualize what they have learned (Kacperczyk 2013; Nanda and Sørensen 2010), and young individuals will absorb valuable entrepreneurial knowledge and experience by joining the family business and imitating their parental role models behaviors (Canovi et al. 2022; Schindehutte, Morris, and Brennan 2003). Besides, the close social distance with entrepreneurial role models also facilitates individuals' feasibility perceptions, such as "*I can do anything he/she can*" (Bosma et al. 2011). Based on the above reasoning, we propose that when individuals have a close social distance from their entrepreneurial role models, their perceived entrepreneurial feasibility becomes stronger.

H6: Social distance moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception. The relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception becomes stronger when social distance is close rather than distant.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample

A sample of 322 final-year students from nine universities in China was recruited. The rationale behind considering these students as the target sample is that starting entrepreneurial activities is a more serious choice for final-year students near graduation (Esfandiar et al. 2019). We used the snowball sampling method to recruit our target participants who have entrepreneurial role models and have not started their businesses yet at the time of this research. We screened participants by asking, "*Do you have a significant/important/inspirational/impressive person in the entrepreneurial area?*" and "*Are you currently self-employed or a business owner?*" Only when participants who have entrepreneurial role models and have not launched their own businesses were included in our sample. With the help of the student employment office and alumni unions, 387 students responded in total, yielding a response rate of 90.44%, similar to other entrepreneurial studies (Wang et al. 2021; Yazici, Memili, and Patel 2022). After eliminating questionnaires that contained missing data, 322 completed questionnaires were collected. Among the final sample,

the average age of participants was 24 years old, and 59.21% were male. Besides, 45.96% had a business-related educational background, 32.19% had a science educational background, and 21.85% were from engineering disciplines. We used GPower to conduct a post hoc power analysis to provide further statistical justification for our final participants' number (Faul and Erdfelder 1992). Specifically, based on Cohen (1988), which suggested a conventional medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.10$), we tested the final sample size of 322 and 9 predictors as the baseline. The results of post hoc power analysis demonstrated that at the alpha level of 0.05, the power to detect the obtained effect for the whole regression in the prediction of entrepreneurial desirability and feasibility perception exceeded 0.99, which was above the value of 0.80 recommended by the previous research (Cohen 1988; Faul and Erdfelder 1992). Therefore, our final sample of 322 was appropriate and representative.

3.2 Measures

All measurement items were initially developed in English. To control for potential international and cultural variations, we translated our measurements into Chines in accordance with the Chinese context based on the back-translation procedure (Brislin 1986). Specifically, two bilingual researchers with expertise in entrepreneurship translated these items from English to Chinese. Then, the Chinese version was translated back to English and compared with the original version. The two researchers resolved inconsistencies through joint discussion.

3.2.1 Entrepreneurial Perceptions

The measurement of entrepreneurial perceptions was divided into *entrepreneurial desirability perception* and *entrepreneurial feasibility perception*. Following Peterman and Kennedy (2003), we asked individuals to evaluate their desirability and feasibility of entrepreneurship. A Likert scale with three items ($\alpha = 0.84$) was used to measure entrepreneurial desirability perception (i.e., a sample item like "*I would love doing it*"), and a five-items Likert scale was used to measure entrepreneurial feasibility perception ($\alpha = 0.85$) (i.e., sample items like "*How sure of yourself are you?*").

3.2.2 Entrepreneurial Role Model

Role models are a common reference that inspires individuals to emulate their behaviors or influence individuals to make certain decisions. We followed and modified Nauta and Kokaly's (2001) measurement. Specifically, we measure the

extent to which role model guides and inspires the individual in an entrepreneurial context. A five-item Likert scale was used (α = 0.75), and the sample item like "*I have a mentor in my potential entrepreneurial career field.*"

3.2.3 Psychological Distance

The psychological distance between entrepreneurial role model and the individual was measured by *social distance* and *spatial distance*, respectively. According to Ensher and Murphy (1997), we measured *social distance* using the extent to individual's perceived similarity of entrepreneurial role model. A five-item Likert scale was adopted and modified in the entrepreneurial context (α = 0.94) (i.e., a sample item like "*My entrepreneurial role model and I see things in much the same way*"). Following Chen et al. (2018), we measured *spatial distance* by coding the distance between entrepreneurial role model and the individual (i.e., a sample item like "*My entrepreneurial role model and I locate local, that is located within 20 miles*"), and the results in an ordinal scale from 1 (*most proximal*) and 4 (*most distal*).

3.2.4 Controls

Previous studies declare that individuals' characteristics and experience (i.e., gender, age, educational level, and prior entrepreneurial experience) influence their entrepreneurial perceptions (Byrne, Fattoum, and Diaz 2018). According to prior empirical studies, males have a higher desire to start entrepreneurship than females (Langowitz and Minniti 2007). We controlled *gender* by using dummy variables, male and female. Moreover, entrepreneurial opportunity costs rise with age (Lévesque and Minniti 2006), and we regard *age* as a control variable by individuals' actual age. Individuals' educational background determines their available opportunities and resources to some extent that may influence their perceptions towards starting their own business, and business-related educational background individuals have a greater interest in entrepreneurial activities (BarNir, Watson, and Hutchins 2011). Thus, we control individuals' *educational backgrounds* by using dummy variables, business-related and non-business-related educational backgrounds. Besides, prior entrepreneurial experience provides opportunities for acquiring skills and performance strategies that promote individuals to perceived entrepreneurial feasibility (Zapkau et al. 2015). Following Zhao, Hills, and Seibert (2005), we control individual's *prior entrepreneurial experience* by using three items Likert scale (α = 0.80) to ask about their level of experience in entrepreneurship-related activities (i.e., a sample item like "*I participated in new venture start-up*"). Table 4 demonstrates all measurement items.

4 Results

The means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlation of variables are shown in Table 1. The result of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin was 0.759 with 0.00 significance, all factor loadings were beyond 0.7, and all values of the square root of *AVE* were larger than all other cross-correlations, which showed good discriminant validity and convergent validity. All Cronbach's α was beyond 0.75, indicating variables had good reliability. The maximum value of *VIF* was 1.396, which is far below the recommended threshold of 10, indicating no collinearity concern (Neter et al. 1996). We conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses to test common method variance (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Results showed that the one-factor model where all items loaded onto one factor (χ^2/df = 6.66, TLI = 0.43, CFI = 0.48, RMSEA = 0.13) was significantly worse fit to the hypothesized four-factor model (χ^2/df = 1.67, TLI = 0.90, CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.05), which indicated that our research has good discriminant validity.

Table 2 presents the regression models of entrepreneurial desirability perception. Model 1 contained control variables, and the results revealed that male (β = 0.183, p < 0.01), age (β = 0.241, p < 0.001), and prior entrepreneurship experience (β = 0.126, p < 0.05) were positively related with entrepreneurial desirability perception. Model 2 introduced entrepreneurial role model as the independent variable to test the main effect, and the result was significant (β = 0.668, p < 0.001, ΔR^2 = 0.415, ΔF = 179.700, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis 1. Model 3-1 introduced social distance, showing that social distance was positively associated with the dependent variable (β = 0.139, p < 0.01). Model 3-2 evaluated the interaction term of entrepreneurial role model and social distance. However, the result was nonsignificant. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was not supported. Model 4-1 showed that spatial distance was nonsignificant with entrepreneurial desirability perception. Model 4-2 contained the interaction term of entrepreneurial role model and spatial distance, and the result was significant (β = 0.373, p < 0.01, ΔR^2 = 0.020, ΔF = 11.087, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis 3. Figure 1 illustrates the moderating effect of spatial distance on entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception.

Table 3 presents the regression models of entrepreneurial feasibility perception. Model 1 contained control variables, and all of them were nonsignificant. Model 2 added the independent variable entrepreneurial role model to test the main effect. The results revealed that entrepreneurial role model was significantly positive associated with entrepreneurial feasibility perception (β = 0.183, p < 0.01, ΔR^2 = 0.025, ΔF = 8.130, p < 0.01). Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Model 3-1 demonstrated that social distance had a nonsignificant relationship with the dependent variable. Model 3-2 contained the interaction item of entrepreneurial

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations among the variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Male	0.592	0.492								
2. Age	1.435	0.631	−0.097							
3. Business related educational background	0.460	0.499	−0.035	−0.054						
4. Prior entrepreneurial experience	2.993	0.986	−0.060	0.156**	0.420**					
5. Entrepreneurial role model	3.714	0.654	0.061	0.199**	0.101	0.481**				
6. Perception of entrepreneurial desirability	3.930	0.584	0.154**	0.218**	0.111*	0.091	0.568**			
7. Perception of entrepreneurial feasibility	3.190	0.640	−0.041	0.010	0.098	0.122*	0.184**	0.109		
8. Social distance	2.470	0.959	−0.236**	−0.006	−0.100	−0.061	−0.233**	−0.061	−0.099	
9. Spatial distance	2.310	0.845	−0.029	−0.033	0.019	−0.126*	−0.264**	−0.110*	−0.039	0.004

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

Table 2: Results of regression analyses of entrepreneurial desirability perception.

	Entrepreneurial desirability perception					
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3-1**	**Model 3-2**	**Model 4-1**	**Model 4-2**
Male	0.183**	0.116**	0.147***	0.149**	0.117**	0.121**
Age	0.241***	0.159***	0.159***	0.156***	0.158***	0.111*
Business related educational background	0.126*	0.195***	0.212***	0.213***	0.193***	0.182***
Prior entrepreneurial experience	0.011	−0.330***	−0.345***	−0.344***	−0.329***	−0.275***
Entrepreneurial role model		0.668***	0.704***	0.707***	0.677***	0.310*
Social distance			0.139**	0.149**		
Spatial distance					0.032	−0.024
Entrepreneurial role model * social distance				−0.020		
Entrepreneurial role model * spatial distance						0.373**
R^2	0.096	0.424	0.441	0.441	0.425	0.444
Adjust R^2	0.084	0.415	0.430	0.429	0.414	0.432
ΔR^2	0.096	0.328	0.017	0.000	0.001	0.020
F	8.406***	46.455***	41.375***	35.396***	38.742***	35.855***
ΔF	8.406***	179.700***	9.631**	0.172	0.524	11.087***

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

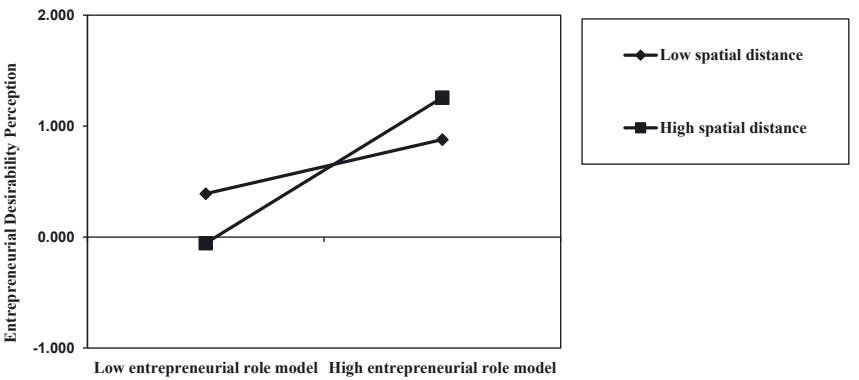

Figure 1: Moderating effects of spatial distance on entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception.

role model and social distance, and the result demonstrated it had a significant negative relationship with entrepreneurial feasibility perception (β = −0.148, $p < 0.05$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.016$, $\Delta F = 5.485$, $p < 0.05$), supporting Hypothesis 6. Figure 2 illustrates

Table 3: Results of regression analyses of entrepreneurial feasibility perception.

	Entrepreneurial feasibility perception					
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3-1**	**Model 3-2**	**Model 4-1**	**Model 4-2**
Male	−0.033	−0.052	−0.067	−0.047	−0.051	−0.052
Age	−0.005	−0.028	−0.028	−0.048	−0.028	−0.019
Business related educational background	0.055	0.074	0.065	0.067	0.074	0.076
Prior entrepreneurial experience	0.098	0.004	0.011	0.018	0.005	−0.006
Entrepreneurial role model		0.183**	0.166*	0.185**	0.185**	0.255**
Social distance			−0.069	0.006		
Spatial distance					0.007	0.018
Entrepreneurial role model * social distance				−0.148*		
Entrepreneurial role model * spatial distance						−0.071
R^2	0.019	0.043	0.047	0.064	0.043	0.044
Adjust R^2	0.006	0.028	0.029	0.043	0.025	0.023
ΔR^2	0.019	0.025	0.004	0.016	0.000	0.001
F	1.507	2.859*	2.614*	3.056**	2.377*	2.067*
ΔF	1.507	8.130**	1.372	5.485*	0.015	0.236

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

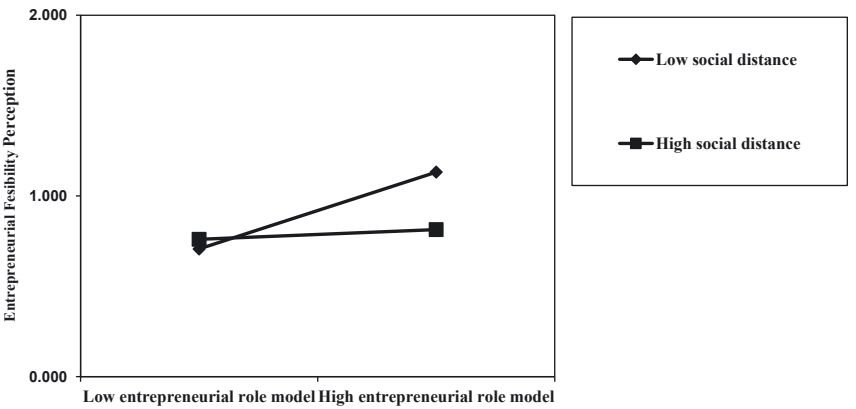

Figure 2: Moderating effects of social distance on entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception.

the moderating effect of social distance on entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception. Model 4-1 introduced spatial distance, and Model 4-2 tested the interaction term of entrepreneurial role model and spatial

distance, both of which had nonsignificant effects. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

5 Discussion

Drawing on social learning theory (Bandura 1997; Bandura and Richard 1977) and construal level theory (Trope and Liberman 2010), this study developed and tested a theoretical model that explains how entrepreneurial role models relate to individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions. Consistent with our hypotheses, the results demonstrated that entrepreneurial role model was positively related to entrepreneurial perceptions (i.e., desirability perception and feasibility perception). In addition, we found that two dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., spatial distance and social distance) moderate the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions, respectively. Specifically, when the spatial distance is distant rather than close, the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and individuals' entrepreneurial desirability perceptions becomes stronger. In contrast, when the social distance is close rather than distant, the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and individuals' entrepreneurial feasibility perceptions becomes stronger.

However, our results showed that the moderating effect of spatial distance on the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception was nonsignificant. A possible reason may be that, although close spatial distance promotes individuals to use a low-level construal to pay more attention to concrete characteristics (e.g., tacit knowledge) and increase the frequency of communication via face-to-face contacts, all that specific information includes positive and negative entrepreneurial aspects. For example, in a German regional study, Wyrwich, Sternberg, and Stuetzer (2018) found that observing business failure increases individuals' fear of failure. Besides, research on the parental entrepreneurial role model also found that when parents suffer economic failure in self-employment, their offspring's propensity to become self-employed is weaker (Mungai and Velamuri 2011). In addition, we also found that the moderating effect of social distance on the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception was nonsignificant. Perhaps this is because when exposed to socially distant or dissimilar entrepreneurial role models, it is hard for individuals to obtain or apply learning experiences to their specific situations due to heterogeneous race or values. For instance, Contín-Pilart and Larraza-Kintana (2015) proposed that relative to natives, immigrants are less likely to be influenced by local entrepreneurial role models due to lower social-culture fit.

5.1 Theoretical Implication

The current study makes several contributions to the current literature in three ways. First, we advance the understanding of how entrepreneurial role models function by elaborating on the specific learning tasks and mechanisms, which supplements prior studies about observing entrepreneurial role models as a social learning process (Gibson 2004; Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017). Our results were consistent with the opinion of Dew et al. (2015), which states that connections with the outside are essential to understanding the entrepreneurial process. Specifically, interaction with entrepreneurial role model plays a vital role in one's learning by using them as a tangible anchor for judging the feasibility and desirability of starting a business. Besides, our findings also confirm that entrepreneurial role models provide knowledge about the entrepreneurial role and prompt individuals' entrepreneurial identity centrality (Türk, Zapkau, and Schwens's 2020).

Second, beyond prior studies which neglected the fact that individuals are embedded in the social context (Chlosta et al. 2012; Liñán and Chen 2009; Lanero, Vázquez, and Aza 2016; Santos, Roomi, and Liñán 2014), we introduce psychological distance as a new moderator in the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial perceptions. By exploring the moderating effects of two dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., spatial distance and social distance), we expand prior research which only focused on the critical moderating role of demographic differences between entrepreneurial role models and individuals (Bosma et al. 2011; Byrne, Fattoum, and Diaz 2018; Hoffmann, Junge, and Malchow-Møller 2015).

Third, our research model also contributes to updating our understanding of the functions of psychological distance in explaning different relationships between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial perceptions, which expand the application of construal level theory in entrepreneurial research (Chen et al. 2018; Davidsson and Honig 2003; Fujita et al. 2006; Santos, Neumeyer, and Morris 2019). Our results demonstrated that spatial distance only moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and desirability perception, whereas social distance solely moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and feasibility perception. These results not only extend previous research, which highlights the importance of social and spatial entrepreneurial connections (Boudreaux, Nikolaev, and Klein 2019; Contín-Pilart and Larraza-Kintana 2015; Mueller 2006) but also advance our knowledge on the distinguished functions of different psychological distance dimensions (Soderberg et al. 2015; Trope and Liberman 2010).

5.2 Practical Implication

This study has some implications for entrepreneurial educators and the government. First, as a vital social learning source, entrepreneurial role models provide opportunities for individuals to learn mental and practical entrepreneurial content through observational learning that increases individuals' entrepreneurial desirability and feasibility perceptions. Therefore, entrepreneurial educators could help to establish and take advantage of entrepreneurial role models to improve individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions. Second, the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and individuals depends on their psychological distances. Specifically, the distant spatial distance increases the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial desirability perception, while the close social distance reinforces the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial feasibility perception. Thus, entrepreneurial educators should balance and optimize entrepreneurial role models' portfolios to improve corresponding entrepreneurial perceptions. For example, they could help individuals who perceive less entrepreneurial feasibility to find entrepreneurial role models with close social distances. Third, for regional entrepreneurship development, the government could expand the influence of entrepreneurial role models to stimulate regional economic growth to a greater degree by improving the social distance between role models and individuals especially.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

The current study still has a few limitations that provide indications for possible avenues of future research. First, this study is rooted in the empirical sample of final-year students in China, limiting the generalization of our findings to other institutional contexts. The Chinese government adopts innovation and entrepreneurship as the major national development strategy, creating a strong entrepreneurial atmosphere. However, culture has been found as an important element in impacting entrepreneurial perceptions (Liñán and Chen 2009). For example, institutional individualism affects the relationship between knowing a nascent entrepreneur and individual's entrepreneurial intention (Schmutzler, Andonova, and Diaz-Serrano 2019). Therefore, future research could analyze the influence of entrepreneurial role model in different countries or regions. Second, although we controlled the gender, age, and educational level of our samples, the results showed that these variables positively related to entrepreneurial desirability perception and had nonsignificant effects on entrepreneurial feasibility perception. Thus, we conducted a series of additional analyses of possible moderating effects, the results demonstrated that male ($b = -0.201$, $p < 0.01$),

business-related educational background ($b = -0.329$, $p < 0.001$), and prior entrepreneurial experience ($b = -0.081$, $p < 0.05$) negatively moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial role models and entrepreneurial desirability perception, and other moderating effects are nonsignificant. In the future, researchers could further explore how these variables affect the impact of entrepreneurial role model on entrepreneurial perceptions. Third, we only explored the relationship between entrepreneurial role model and entrepreneurial perceptions. However, observation also happens at the post-start stage (Capelleras et al. 2019; Zhao et al. 2022), and the learning contents are also different at the pre-start and post-start stages (Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017). For example, observing entrepreneurial role model may stimulate individuals' different affect configurations, which help to cope with opportunity recognition or exploitation (Santos et al. 2020), or reshape individuals' values, which foster entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial behavior (Santos et al. 2021). Future research could continue to explore what and how individuals learn from entrepreneurial role models at other entrepreneurial stages. In addition, the family business provides unique and continuous experiential observing sources and tasks, such as entrepreneurial spirit, entrepreneurial mindset, and family-specific tacit knowledge (Canovi et al. 2022). Future research could also explore how individuals in the family business (e.g., next-generation family members) observe their entrepreneurial role models in family businesses during transgenerational entrepreneurship.

Competing interests: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Appendix

Table 4.

Table 4: A measurement items.

Variables	Items	Sources
Entrepreneurial desirability perception (3-items) Entrepreneurial feasibility perception (5-items)	I would love doing it. How tense would you be? How enthusiastic would you be? How hard do you think it would be? How certain of success are you? How overworked would you be? Do you know enough to start a business? How sure of yourself are you?	Peterman, N. E., & Kennedy, J. (2003). Enterprise Education: Influencing Students' Perceptions of Entrepreneurship [J]. Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 28(2), 129–144.

Table 4: (continued)

Variables	Items	Sources
Entrepreneurial role model (5-items)	There is an entrepreneurial person I am trying to be like in my career pursuits. There is an entrepreneurial person particularly inspirational to me in my career path. In the career path I am pursuing, there is an entrepreneurial person I admire. I have a mentor in my potential entrepreneurial career field. I know of an entrepreneurial person who has a career I would like to pursue.	Nauta, M. M., & Kokaly, M. L. (2001). Assessing Role Model Influences on Students' Academic and Vocational Decisions[J]. Journal of Career Assessment, 9(1):81–99.
Spatial distance (4-items)	My entrepreneurial role model and I locate: Local, that is located within 20 miles. Regional, that is more than 20 but less than 100 miles away. National, that is more than 100 miles away but within China. International, that is outside of China.	Chen, H. S., Mitchell, R. K., Brigham, K. H., et al. (2018). Perceived psychological distance, construal processes, and abstractness of entrepreneurial action [J]. Journal of Business Venturing, 33(3), 296–314.
Social distance (5-items)	My entrepreneurial role model and I see things in much the same way. My entrepreneurial role model was similar in terms of our outlook, perspective, and values. My entrepreneurial role model and I are alike in a number of areas. My entrepreneurial role model and I thought alike in terms of coming up with a similar solution for a problem. My entrepreneurial role model and I analyzed problems in a similar way.	Ensher, E. A. & Murphy, S. E. (1997). Effects of race, gender, perceived similarity, and contact on mentor relationships[J]. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 50(3), 460–481.

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