The Association between Entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control, Personality, Empathy, and Assertiveness in a Romanian Sample of Nascent Entrepreneurs

Elena-Loreni Baciu 1, Delia Vîrgă 2, Theofild-Andrei Lazăr 1, Delia Gligor 3 and Cecilia-Nicoleta Jurcut 3,*

1 Department of Social Work, The Research-Action Centre on Discrimination and Social Inclusion, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timişoara, 300223 Timişoara, Romania; elena.baciu@e-uvt.ro (E.-L.B.); theofild.lazar@e-uvt.ro (T.-A.L.)
2 Department of Psychology, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timişoara, 300223 Timişoara, Romania; delia.virga@e-uvt.ro
3 Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, West University of Timişoara, 300115 Timişoara, Romania; delia.gligor@e-uvt.ro
* Correspondence: cecilia.jurcut@e-uvt.ro

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Abstract: In today’s global context, entrepreneurship is recognized as the engine of sustainable economic growth, competitiveness and employment in the economy of any nation. In order to improve the measures aimed at encouraging the creation of new businesses, an enhanced understanding of the drivers of nascent entrepreneurship seems essential. Drawing on planned behavior theory and the approach of entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control (PBC) as a motivational antecedent in starting a new business, the current study seeks to understand how the personal characteristics of the entrepreneurs influence entrepreneurial PBC. Three types of characteristics were assessed in a sample of 212 Romanian nascent entrepreneurs: personality traits (Big Five model), empathy, and assertiveness. The hierarchical multilinear regression analysis, in which entrepreneurial PBC was treated as a dependent variable, showed that the model with the highest explanatory power for the variance of results of entrepreneurial PBC included characteristics from all three levels: personality traits—Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness; empathy—personal distress and perspective-taking; and adaptive assertiveness. Additionally, the findings showed that adaptive assertiveness provides an effect over and above personality factors and empathy on the entrepreneurial PBC. The practical implications of these findings indicate that to enhance the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education programs, components aiming to enhance internal personal resources of entrepreneurs (such as assertive communication skills) should be added.

Keywords: nascent entrepreneurs; perceived behavioral control; personality traits; empathy; assertiveness

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurial activity has a significant impact on the economic development, competitiveness, and sustainability of a country because it contributes to economic growth, the creation of jobs, and the development of innovative products and services [1,2]. As such, the field of entrepreneurship has been intensely researched during the last decades by various disciplines, employing a multitude of conceptual and empirical approaches, as the concept is multifaceted and of significant importance.
for both private and public organizations. Although there are considerable social and economic benefits associated with entrepreneurship [3,4], the prevalence rate of entrepreneurship is still low in many regions of the world [5], and especially in developing countries [6]. However, there are some exceptions: in Romania, the number of newly created businesses is increasing yearly (over the last ten years it increased by 16%), with almost half of these represented by individual entrepreneurs [7]. Various studies have committed to finding explanations for this circumstance, revealing a high preference for self-employment in Romanian individuals that predicts the intention to start a new business [8], as well as their perception of entrepreneurship as a right career choice [9]. Romania has the highest score for intentional entrepreneurs among the efficiency-driven EU countries (33% as opposed to 15.98% in Hungary), as well as an above EU average score on nascent entrepreneurs’ rates, with a 5.30% rate as opposed to the 4.80% EU average [10]. Understanding the explanations that generate this context can provide important insight into the most appropriate entrepreneurial activity approaches.

In an effort to increase entrepreneurial activity in order to stimulate employment, economic development, and growth [5], various academic, educational, and governmental actors have delved into investigating the factors that influence entrepreneurial intentions [11,12]. One important focus area is represented by the period preceding the actual entrepreneurial activity because it provides a well-suited context to enhance the understanding of the drivers and inhibitors of entrepreneurship and explain why the levels of entrepreneurial activity vary between certain types of individuals or groups [11,13].

In this respect, the link between higher educational attainment and entrepreneurial intentions has proved a vital place to start the investigation. Research findings showed that entrepreneurs with higher education levels, industrial and managerial experience, and business exposure have greater chances of succeeding in their business [14] since access to higher education provides advantages that enable a successful career in entrepreneurship [15–18]. The relevance of experience and education in choosing an entrepreneurial career has been amply discussed, mainly because they provide both an enhanced awareness about entrepreneurship as a professional career option [19] and greater knowledge about the market needs and the ability to develop an appropriate product or service to satisfy these needs [20]. Higher education levels have the potential to enhance the entrepreneurial efficacy of students through providing the experience of mastery, expose them to certain role models, and support their involvement in learning activities that foster entrepreneurial knowledge and values [20–23], which in turn influence the entrepreneurial intentions of the individual [24].

Moreover, universities are increasingly involved in supporting new venture creation through both teaching and research, thus contributing to the creation of an entrepreneurial mindset and positively influencing individuals’ predisposition towards entrepreneurship [25–27]. In this respect, the study of Passaro et al. [28] demonstrates that the level of higher education and the specific characteristics of the educational activities (theory-based vs. training- and practice-based) are essential factors in forming the entrepreneurial intention.

In addition to the level of educational attainment, the personal characteristics of the individuals have also been found to play a significant part in their entrepreneurial approach [24,29–32], especially when deciding to become an entrepreneur [33–35].

Characteristics such as initiative, persistence, concern, commitment, persuasion, self-confidence, and assertiveness have been observed to impact entrepreneurial initiative and entrepreneurial success [36,37].

However, the creation of a new business is not an easy process but rather a complex one that involves various stages and transitions [38] that ultimately lead to the identification of different types of entrepreneurs (nascent entrepreneurs, latent entrepreneurs, real entrepreneurs) [39]. Among those, nascent entrepreneurs are the primary actors (covering the conception and the gestation stage of the process), as they are the ones committed (in terms of ideas, time and resources allocated) to founding a new business [40–44]. The level of this commitment will ultimately lead to either a successful new business or an abandoned idea.
2. Objectives and Hypothesis

2.1. Entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control

Several studies, based on the theory of planned behavior [45], which stipulates that individual intention has a positive and strong influence on the next actions, examined the effect of three components—personal attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—on the intentions to engage in entrepreneurial behavior [19,46–48].

The intention is considered a key predictor in determining a person’s behavior in making decisions [6], especially when the behavior is difficult to observe [49], which is the case for entrepreneurial behavior, a kind of planned behavior based on intention [50], which involves time lags and is generally rare [11,51].

Together with intentions, entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control is theorized to influence behavior, positing that a person’s intention can lead to actual behavior only if that person feels capable of performing the behavior concerned [11,45].

Entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control (PBC) is understood as the perception of the ease or difficulty of becoming an entrepreneur [24], therefore referring to the subjective evaluation of a person’s own entrepreneurial ability, resources, and the possibility of entrepreneurial success [52]. Although conceptually it is considered to share some degree of similarity to self-efficacy (SE) [53] and perceived feasibility [54], it is widely used as a stand-alone concept because it encompasses not only the feeling of being able but also the perception about the controllability of the behavior [24]. Although the available resources to start up a business and the entrepreneurial abilities possessed by an individual could be seen as objective factors which are incremental for the success of the entrepreneurial activity, their assessment can actually be very subjective: depending on the individual that makes the assessment, the same number of resources or abilities can be considered as plentiful or not enough [52].

Therefore, what is more important in the stage of moving from entrepreneurial intention to actual entrepreneurial behavior is the person’s positive perception of these resources and capabilities, which in turn can fuel the process required by such a transition [51,52]. People who have a more positive perception about their resources and capabilities also perceive entrepreneurship more as an opportunity than a risk, making them more inclined to start their business [52,55].

From this perspective, entrepreneurial PBC can be seen as a motivational intention antecedent of actual entrepreneurial behavior. Therefore, PBC plays a dual role in entrepreneurial behavior, shaping entrepreneurial intentions and interacting with them to jointly affect behavior [11]. Studies taken in Eastern and Western cultures have established PBC as a good predictor of entrepreneurial intention [51,52,56]. Research undertaken in Western cultures has found that PBC was the best predictor of entrepreneurial intention, followed by attitude and subjective norms [51,52].

One study integrating planned behavior theory with motivation-opportunity-ability theory showed that PBC has a central role in developing entrepreneurial intention among Taiwanese participants in an entrepreneurial training-course, with both direct and indirect effects on this type of intention [48]. Previous studies aimed at analyzing the factors that influence PBC levels in entrepreneurs have focused mainly on external conditions that describe the entrepreneurs’ environment, rather than internal ones, like the characteristics of the entrepreneurs. These studies have found PBC levels to be sensitive to environmental factors like cultural influences, social pressures [24] competitive environments [6], or governmental support [56].

Since nascent entrepreneurs hold significant potential for sustainable economic and social local development, it becomes increasingly important to understand more about the drivers and inhibitors that shape the decision to start a business in order to stimulate entrepreneurial activity, especially in developing countries.

Therefore, the current study takes a closer look at the link between entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control, as a motivational antecedent of actual entrepreneurial behavior, and the characteristics of
the nascent entrepreneurs, in order to understand how these personal characteristics influence entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control and, therefore, the decision to start the business.

The main objective is to understand which personal characteristics are associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control.

Based on the findings of previous studies, we took into account three types of characteristics: personality traits, empathy, and assertiveness.

2.2. Personality Traits and Entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control

Entrepreneurial behavior, as an output of the entrepreneur’s personality traits, has known an increased interest in entrepreneurial research. Personality traits are considered the determinant factors of an individual’s behavior that present significant potential in influencing decisions (such as starting a new business) and actions that can lead to success.

Although personality traits can be described generically, such an approach is rarely useful since it does not accurately prove and measure the impact on the entrepreneurial decision-making process. Consequently, throughout time, different models of identifying and analyzing the personal traits of a successful entrepreneur were developed [57], more often with an emphasis on individuals’ way of thinking, feeling, and acting in various circumstances [1].

Since the 1980s, a consensus was reached in accepting the use of the five-factor model of personality traits that determines an individual’s comprehensive personality through five specific personal dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism [36,58–62]. Refined through various studies over time, the model (currently named the Big-Five personality traits) was proved to be both reliable, as it was demonstrated that it is robust across different cultures [63], as well as stable over time [60,64].

In relation to nascent entrepreneurs and their personality traits, studies showed that these five personality factors play an essential part in the entrepreneurial intention and the success or failure of their new business [65–71]. Studies focused on identifying a psychological profile of the entrepreneurs found the entrepreneurial profile compatible with high scores on extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness and low scores on agreeableness and neuroticism [72–74].

Therefore, based on the results of the previous studies regarding the relationship between the entrepreneurial intention and the personality traits of the entrepreneurs, we advance the first working hypothesis of the study:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Personality traits are associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control.

2.3. Empathy and Entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control

Beyond the individual’s personality traits, other characteristics play an essential role in setting up the entrepreneurial intention and modelling the success of the newly created businesses. Studies show that empathy is an important antecedent of entrepreneurial intentions, especially in the case of social entrepreneurship, as empathic individuals are more likely to consider the welfare of other individuals or groups in need [75–78]. Empathy represents a central component of normal social functioning, providing a basis for prosocial behavior [79], maintaining social relationships [80], and increasing psychological well-being [81]. This type of behavior—called “the other-orientation”—is demonstrated to be a precursor for entrepreneurial intention among individuals that show a high level of empathy [75,82,83], although indirectly, through agency and communion [84].

Drawing on the results of the previous studies regarding the relationship between the entrepreneurial intention and the levels of empathy among the entrepreneurs, we established the second working hypothesis of the study:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Empathy is associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control.
2.4. Assertiveness and Entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control

In addition, various studies indicate assertiveness as one of the personal characteristics of entrepreneurs that can impact the success of the business [85–87]. Assertiveness is defined as standing up for one’s legitimate rights without violating others’ rights [88], namely expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways. Assertiveness represents the path to actively respond to interpersonal conflicts, to ensure needs fulfillment [89], being a skill with high relevance in the entrepreneurial process [90]. Different assertive techniques applied to the entrepreneurial endeavor emerged, including organizational promotion, ingratiation, exemplification, supplication, and even intimidation [91,92]. In this respect, there is an extensive literature that associates assertiveness or assertive behavior and techniques with different types of entrepreneurs, often concluding that this characteristic is essential for nascent entrepreneurs in creating the business ventures, gaining cognitive legitimacy [93], confidence in their venture [91] and ultimately leading it to success [94–96]. For a successful entrepreneur, the level of assertiveness should represent a balance between boldness and caution [91] to secure potential investment opportunities from various parties. Studies in the field lead to a general agreement that an assertive entrepreneur is more likely able to gain approval and support from stakeholders, especially in the case of nascent entrepreneurs and new businesses, as they are more dependent and responsive to the external factors of the entrepreneurial ecosystem [97,98].

Based on the results of the previous studies regarding the relationship between assertiveness and entrepreneurial behavior and success, but also holding in mind the influences of the personality traits and the empathy levels in entrepreneurial endeavors, we established the third and last working hypothesis of the study:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). Adaptive assertiveness is associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control after controlling the effect of personality traits and empathy.

By taking into consideration these types of characteristics, the study brings an added-value to the exploration of the underlying factors of the development of the Romanian entrepreneurial landscape, since most of the previous studies were focused on socio-demographic characteristics of entrepreneurs and financial and cultural factors [99–104]. Moreover, shifting the focus from external to internal factors (like personal characteristics of entrepreneurs), we try to enhance the current understanding of what influences the entrepreneurial PBC levels.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Sample of the Study

The sample used for the current study consisted of 212 nascent entrepreneurs with a high level of educational attainment (at least a Bachelor’s degree) residing in the Western Region of Romania. The subjects were recruited from two organizations’ registered beneficiaries (a public entity and a private one), providing support programs for labor market integration and entrepreneurial activity.

Based on the mailing lists provided by the administrators of the support programs, all the beneficiaries registered with the two organization were invited to fill an online questionnaire, meant to set up their individual baseline profile, which consisted of two parts: the first one was dedicated to the assessment of the demographic and professional characteristics (age, sex, professional experience, level and type of studies), while the second one aimed to assess their personal characteristics (personality traits, empathy, assertiveness). The participants received no incentives for taking part in the study and were informed about the purpose of the research.

From a total of about 1000 persons who received the invitation, 212 provided complete answers that were validated for the study. Thus, the response rate among the potential subjects was 21 percent. As noted by various authors [105–107], the participation rates in online data collection are lower than in traditional pencil-and-paper surveys. On the one hand, the lower completion rates are found especially
among longer surveys [106,108,109], such as ours, which had 92 items, without counting those in the socio-demographic questionnaire. On the other hand, very recent research shows a general decrease in overall response rates to online surveys [106,107,110,111], which could be the effect of a “survey fatigue” brought about by the overuse of this data collection approach [112]. However, the fact that the respondents that completed the questionnaire chose to participate voluntarily, without any incentive, reflects positively on the quality of the responses [105].

From the total number of subjects who provided validated answers, 29.2 percent were male (62 participants), and 70.8 percent were female (150 participants). The average age for the entire sample was 28.27 years, with the youngest respondent being 20 years old and the oldest 61 years old. Regarding the highest level of education completed by the subjects in the sample, 70.3 percent graduated university studies (bachelor level or equivalent), and 29.7 percent have completed a postgraduate study program (higher than bachelor level).

Regarding the overall professional experience, almost half of the respondents (46.7%) had less than one year or no professional experience at all, 23.6 percent had a considerable level of such expertise (ten or more years of experience), 19.3 percent had between one and five years of experience and 10.4 percent had between five and ten years of experience.

### 3.2. Measures

For the current study, we have used the measures and scoring techniques as originally designed by their authors.

**The entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control** was measured using the subscale Perceived Behavioral Control of the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire (EIQ) [24] based on the standard back-translation technique [113]. The subscale has 6 items (example of item “To start a firm and keep it working would be easy for me”). The items were scored on a 7-point scale—from 1 (Total disagreement) to 7 (Total agreement). A higher score indicates that the persons assess their entrepreneurial ability, resources, and the possibility of entrepreneurial success positively. Therefore, they perceive that becoming an entrepreneur is an easy task for them.

**The personality traits** were measured with the Romanian version [114] of the Five-Factor Model—Big Five (Goldberg, 1992). IPIP-50 is an instrument developed in the International Personality Item Pool project, which evaluates the personality markers described by Goldberg [115]. The model targets five major personality factors: Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism (as opposed to Emotional Stability), Agreeableness, and Openness. The test contains 50 items (ten for each factor) in the form of short statements about characteristics and behaviors, which participants assess using a Likert scale from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement), depending on how much they are characterized by the statements (Extraversion—“I am the soul of the party”; Conscientiousness—“I follow a schedule”; Neuroticism—“I irritate easily”; Agreeableness—“I like people”; Openness—“I am full of ideas”). Scores are calculated separately for each factor. Persons with high scores on Extraversion are described as lively, communicative, playful, expressive, spontaneous, disinhibited, energetic, talkative, animated, courageous, with high self-esteem, sincere, ambitious, optimistic, and with a sense of humor. Persons with high scores on Conscientiousness are described as organized, efficient, trustworthy, accurate, perseverant, cautious, punctual, firm, dignified, predictable, temperate, conventional, and logical. Persons with high scores on Neuroticism are characterized as insecure, fearful, unstable, emotional, envious, naive, and rude. High scores on Agreeableness indicate a person’s tendency toward cooperation, kindness, indulgence, politeness, generosity, flexibility, modesty, morality, warmth, realism, and genuineness. Persons with high Openness scores are intellectual, deep, intuitive, intelligent, creative, curious, and sophisticated.

**Empathy** was measured with three of the four subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) [116]: Perspective-Taking (PT), Empathic Concern (EC), and Personal Distress (PD). Each of the sub-scales contains 7 items. Items are formulated as self-assessments, in which subjects answer using a 5-point Likert scale, from 0 (“Does not describe me well”) to 4 (“Describes me very
The scores are calculated individually for each subscale. The PD and EC scales assess affective components of empathy, while the PT scale represents the cognitive component [117]. Each of the subscales assesses different empathic dispositions: high scores on Perspective-Taking indicate the tendency to adopt another’s psychological perspective; high scores on Empathic Concern show the tendency to experience feelings of warmth, sympathy, and concern toward others, while increased scores on Personal Distress indicate the tendency to have feelings of discomfort and concern when witnessing others’ negative experiences [116,117].

**Assertiveness** was measured using the Adaptive Assertiveness subscale of the Adaptive and Aggressive Assertiveness Scales—AAA-S [118]. AAS assumes the existence of two possible types of assertive response: (1) aggressive assertiveness (denotes the use of coercive behaviors or violation of the rights of others, in the process of ensuring needs fulfillment); (2) adaptive assertiveness (represents the use of socially acceptable behaviors, without violating the rights of others, in the process of ensuring needs fulfillment). AAA-S comprises 19 scenarios (listed in 30 items) that describe everyday situations in which the subject can express his assertiveness. Assertive responses are listed for each scenario, with half representing adaptive assertive responses and half aggressive, assertive responses. There are 15 items associated with the aggressive response and 15 associated with the adaptive response. In the current study, we have used the 15 associated with the adaptive response (“When a stranger borrows something from me and forgets to give it back, I . . . ask if they need it anymore and ask for it back”). Based on these scenarios, the participants indicated how they would react in each situation, using a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Higher scores on this scale indicate an increased tendency of the participants to use an adaptive response in relation to others, employing active behaviors that secure the fulfillment of their needs in a socially acceptable manner (such as negotiation) without violating the others’ rights.

3.3. Data Analysis

We have run one hierarchical multilinear regression analysis for testing the hypotheses, where entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control has been treated as a dependent variable. We followed the algorithm for this dependent variable: in the first step, we introduced all five personality traits: emotional stability, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness, and extraversion. After controlling the influence of personality traits, we introduced components of empathy. In step three, we introduced adaptive assertiveness as a personal resource. The regression analysis was performed in SPSS 23.0.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, internal consistency, and correlations established between the model variables. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients are higher than 0.70, ranging from 0.71 for perspective-taking, as the subscale of the empathy, and 0.93 for the scale that measures entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control.

The first proposed hypothesis received statistical support. Neuroticism correlated negatively and significantly with entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control ($r = -0.32, p < 0.001$), but conscientiousness ($r = 0.21, p < 0.001$), Openness to experience ($r = 0.32, p < 0.001$), Agreeableness ($r = 0.13, p < 0.01$), and Extraversion ($r = 0.28, p < 0.001$) correlated positively with this variable. Additionally, only Personal Distress, as a component of empathy, correlated negatively and significantly with entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control ($r = -0.36, p < 0.001$), while the other two components of empathy (Empathic Concern and Perspective-Taking) did not show a significant correlation with it ($r = -0.08, p = 0.24$, respectively $r = 0.008, p = 0.92$). Last but not least, Adaptive Assertiveness correlated positively and significantly with entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control ($r = 0.37, p < 0.001$).
Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients between variables (N = 212).

| Variables                        | M    | SD   | 1.  | 2.  | 3.  | 4.  | 5.  | 6.  | 7.  | 8.  | 9.  |
|----------------------------------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. Neuroticism                   | 2.79 | 0.70 | -   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 2. Conscientiousness             | 3.17 | 0.41 | 0.44** | -   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 3. Openness to experience        | 3.28 | 0.41 | 0.28** | 0.50** | -   |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 4. Agreeableness                 | 3.26 | 0.38 | 0.28** | 0.51** | 0.50** | -   |     |     |     |     |     |
| 5. Extraversion                  | 3.11 | 0.41 | 0.27** | 0.48** | 0.58** | 0.60** | -   |     |     |     |     |
| 6. Personal Distress             | 1.61 | 0.62 | 0.60** | 0.15* | 0.04 | 0.18* | 0.06 | -   |     |     |     |
| 7. Empathic Concerns             | 2.81 | 0.61 | 0.22* | 0.11 | 0.17* | 0.14* | 0.05 | 0.22* | -   |     |     |
| 8. Perspective-Taking            | 2.68 | 0.61 | -0.02 | 0.17* | 0.22* | 0.24* | 0.19* | -0.04 | 0.59** | -   |     |
| 9. Adaptive Assertiveness        | 3.60 | 0.58 | -0.11 | 0.19* | 0.34** | 0.31** | 0.26** | -0.20* | 0.08 | 0.18* | -   |
| 10. Entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control | 4.58 | 1.67 | -0.32** | 0.21** | 0.32** | 0.13* | 0.28** | -0.36** | -0.08 | 0.007 | 0.37** |

Notes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. Source: Authors’ contribution in SPSS 23.0. Scale from 1 to 5 for Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Adaptive Assertiveness; from 0 to 4 for Personal Distress, Empathic Concern, and Perspective-Taking; from 1 to 7 for entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control.
Table 2 shows the hierarchical regression results with the entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control as the dependent variable. Concerning the entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control, in the first step, personality traits contributed to the variance of the dependent variable in the proportion of 36% \( (R = 0.60; F (5, 206) = 23.69, p < 0.001) \). Four personality traits are significant predictors of entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control: Neuroticism \( (\beta = -0.54, p < 0.001) \), Extraversion \( (\beta = 0.21, p < 0.01) \), Openness to experience \( (\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001) \), and Conscientiousness \( (\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001) \). Only Agreeableness did not function as a predictor for entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control \( (\beta = -0.10, \text{ns.}) \). These results support Hypothesis 1, which stated that personality traits are associated with entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control.

| Variables | Entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control | \( R^2/\Delta R^2 \) | \( \beta \) |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| **Step 1** |                                             |                      |         |
| Neuroticism |                                             | 0.60                 | -0.54 **|
| Extraversion |                                             |                      | 0.21 *  |
| Openness to experience |                         | 0.26 *               |         |
| Agreeableness |                                             | -0.10                |         |
| Conscientiousness |                                           | 0.27 *               |         |
| **Step 2** |                                             | 0.64                 | -0.49 **|
| Neuroticism |                                             |                      |         |
| Extraversion |                                             | 0.22 *               |         |
| Openness to experience |                     | 0.25 **              |         |
| Agreeableness |                                             | -0.05                |         |
| Conscientiousness |                                       | 0.27 **              |         |
| Empathic Concern |                                      | 0.11                 |         |
| Personal Distress |                               | -0.16 *              |         |
| Perspective-Taking |                              | -0.21 *              |         |
| **Step 3** |                                             | 0.65                 | -0.45 **|
| Neuroticism |                                             |                      |         |
| Extraversion |                                             | 0.21 *               |         |
| Openness to experience |                     | 0.21                |         |
| Agreeableness |                                             | -0.09                |         |
| Conscientiousness |                                       | 0.26 *               |         |
| Empathic Concern |                                       | 0.09                 |         |
| Personal Distress |                               | -0.13 *              |         |
| Perspective-Taking |                              | -0.21 *              |         |
| Adaptive Assertiveness |                     | 0.17 *               |         |

Notes: * \( p < 0.05 \); ** \( p < 0.01 \) Source: Authors’ contribution in SPSS 23.0.

In the second step, adding empathy leads to explaining the variance of the entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control in the proportion of 40% \( (R = 0.64; F (3, 203) = 4.16, p < 0.01) \) accounting for an additional 3% of the variance compared to the first model. In the second equation, Personal Distress is a significant predictor for entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control \( (\beta = -0.16, p = 0.02) \), while Empathic Concern in a non-significant predictor \( (\beta = 0.11, \text{ns.}) \). Perspective-Taking, as a component of empathy, is also a significant predictor \( (\beta = -0.21, p = 0.004) \). Therefore, the second proposed hypothesis received partial statistical support. Thus, Personal Distress and Perspective-Taking are associated with entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control as components of empathy.

The introduction of Adaptive Assertiveness, as a personal resource, in the third step, increases the explanatory power over the previous models by another 2% \( (R = 0.65; F (1, 202) = 8.43, p < 0.01) \). The third model, which includes personality traits, empathy, and assertiveness, has the highest explanatory power for the variance of entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control \( (R^2 = 0.42) \). In the third step, Adaptive Assertiveness, as a personal resource, is a significant predictor for entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control \( (\beta = 0.17, p < 0.01) \). In this step, Agreeableness was non-significant,
Empathic Concern was non-significant, and Personal Distress and Perspective-Taking were still significant (PD is marginally significant in this step), together with four personality traits. Thus, all three types of variables taken together have the highest explanatory value. Adaptive Assertiveness has an essential contribution over and above personality traits and empathy as an interpersonal dimension. The results of the third step for the regression analysis supported Hypothesis 3.

5. Conclusions

Because the entrepreneurial activity is considered an essential component to economic growth, the research efforts dedicated to understanding how a person becomes an entrepreneur contributes to encouraging entrepreneurship [48]. However, the debut of any entrepreneurial activity is closely linked to the individuals’ readiness and willingness to found and start a new business [119–121]. Since individuals’ intentions lead to actual behavior only in the presence of feelings of capability [11,45], entrepreneurial intentions and entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control become important in the study of entrepreneurial behavior.

Based on the approach of entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control as a motivational intention antecedent of actual entrepreneurial behavior, the current study aimed at analyzing the association between personal characteristics of nascent Romanian entrepreneurs (personality traits, empathy, and assertiveness) and their level of entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control.

The study hypothesized that each of the three types of characteristics is associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control: personality, empathy, and assertiveness and that adaptive assertiveness also provides an effect over and above personality factors and empathy on the entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control.

The first working hypothesis (Personality traits are associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control) received statistical support. The hierarchical regression results showed that Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience and Conscientiousness are significant predictors of entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control and contributed to 36% of the variance observed in the dependent variable among the subjects of our study. Although Agreeableness showed a positive correlation with entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control, it did not function as a significant predictor for it.

The second hypothesis (Empathy is associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control) received partial statistical support. In the second step of the hierarchical regression analysis, we observed an increased explanatory power (40%) of the variance of entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control when adding empathy. As components of empathy, Personal Distress and Perspective-Taking were significant predictors for entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control, while Empathic Concern was non-significant.

The third hypothesis (Adaptive assertiveness is associated with entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control after controlling the effect of personality traits and empathy) also received statistical support. In the third step of the hierarchical regression analysis, when adding Adaptive Assertiveness, the explanatory power increased to 42%. Thus, Adaptive Assertiveness, as a personal resource, is a significant predictor for entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control and the model that includes personality traits, empathy, and assertiveness, provided the highest explanatory power for the variance of entrepreneurial Perceived Behavioral Control.

Therefore, we conclude that entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control levels are influenced not only by the personality traits, but also by other factors (such as empathy and assertiveness), which act as personal resources for the individuals and help to model their behavior.

Because previous studies established entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control as a good predictor of entrepreneurial intention [51,52,56], this finding’s applicative implication would relate to the recommended interventions addressed to enhancing entrepreneurial activity in various regions. More specifically, the confirmation of the third hypothesis opens up a new perspective on the approaches used in encouraging entrepreneurship. In the future, these approaches could include
measures addressed to the development of entrepreneurs’ internal personal resources, which in turn will enhance their levels of perceived behavioral control and thus increase their motivation to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Since empathy and adaptive assertiveness are significant predictors for entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control, an increase in these types of resources will enhance the individual’s entrepreneurial PBC level.

Although initially considered a stable trait, empathy proved to be responsive to various types of interventions designed to enhance it: motivation-based [122], educational interventions [123] and experiential training [124]. In a review of the various empathy-building interventions developed over time [125], the authors conclude that one of the most significant merits of these interventions is that they proved the malleability of empathy.

On the other hand, assertiveness training, as a component of social skills training, aimed at assisting individuals in developing more competent social functioning [126] has been in use for a few decades now, and with good results for both adults and adolescents [126–128].

Therefore, measures aimed at enhancing entrepreneurial activity, especially in developing regions, would benefit by adding to specific support programs (such as entrepreneurship education or financial support programs) components like interventions dedicated to empathy-building and assertiveness trainings for nascent entrepreneurs.

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