

IMAGE NORMS AND ENTREPRENEURIAL CAREERS

Amy E. Hurley-Hanson, Argyros School of Business and Economics, Chapman University, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866, 714-628-7312, fax 714-532-6081, ahurley@chapman.edu
Cristina M. Giannantonio, Argyros School of Business and Economics, Chapman University, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866, 714-628-7320, fax 714-532-6081, giannant@chapman.edu

ABSTRACT

Research on entrepreneurial intentions suggests that millennials' impressions of entrepreneurial careers have been strongly influenced by success stories of high profile entrepreneurs. Despite the growing research on entrepreneurial intentions, little research has examined the entrepreneurial image norms held by millennials. We hypothesize that an important factor which may be influencing millennials' intentions to pursue an entrepreneurial career is the operation of *image norms*. The addition of image norms to the literature on entrepreneurial intentions may offer important insights into millennials' interest in pursuing entrepreneurial careers.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a research study exploring *image norms* of entrepreneurs. College courses and university programs in entrepreneurship have risen dramatically over the past five years. Research on entrepreneurial intentions suggests that millennials' impressions of entrepreneurial careers have been strongly influenced by high profile success stories of entrepreneurs such as Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Andrew Mason of Groupon. Research suggests that half to two-thirds of millennials are interested in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are one group who may have an image norm created by millennials. An *image norm* is the belief that people must present a certain image, consistent with occupational, organizational, or industry standards, in order to achieve career success [2]. While researchers have explored the effects of physical attractiveness on careers [6], the role image plays in career success has received limited academic attention. *Image* is defined as the totality of an individual's personal appearance. It is a broader construct than physical attractiveness, encompassing several dimensions of attractiveness. Historically, much of the physical attractiveness research has focused on specific physical characteristics such as height and weight [3] [4], clothing [7], facial beauty [8], and handicapped status [1].

Image norms may also play a role in the occupational and job choice decisions of individuals at several stages in their career [2]. Individuals' beliefs about their own image as well as the perceived image of certain occupations, organizations, and industries may influence the decision to pursue or avoid different career paths. Individuals have beliefs about the image of the people who work for a company. The belief that a certain image is a hiring requirement in certain organizations or is necessary for advancement in those companies may result in applicant self-selection into or out of those companies. If an individual does not believe that they have the specific image to succeed in an occupation then the person is not likely to choose that occupation for their career. In a similar fashion, if an individual does not believe that they are attractive enough to be hired by or to advance in an organization (and they believe that physical attractiveness is a necessary requirement for entry or advancement in that organization), then the person is not likely to choose that organization for their career.

Individual career decisions may be partly influenced by three different (but related) sets of image perceptions. First, individuals form perceptions about their own image and level of physical attractiveness. The second set of perceptions involves occupational stereotypes. This is the belief that a certain image is a requirement for entry into an occupation or advancement in one's career path. Job information may be gleaned from images portrayed in the media, contact with individuals in specific jobs, and part time work experiences. An important source of *image norms* is one's own experiences in occupational exploration. During the early stage of career exploration, individuals will meet people who occupy different job categories. These individuals may serve as prototypes of what "typical" people in different jobs look like. If the job incumbent is physically attractive, the individual may assume that physical attractiveness is a requirement for entry or advancement in that occupation. Finally, the third set of perceptions individuals may develop involves the relationship between their image and an organization's image. The term *organizational image* has been used to describe general impressions of a company. Image has been defined as the way that people perceive an organization, consisting of their knowledge, beliefs, and feelings about an organization [9].

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