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Gaining legitimacy: an identity-based view for international Lebanese entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Entrepreneurial legitimacy is a multidimensional construct that remains conceptually fragmented despite its recognized importance in entrepreneurship research. While various disciplines have explored legitimacy through sociological, psychological, and organizational lenses, a unified theory has yet to emerge. Prior research highlights the role of legitimacy in organizational success, particularly in gaining stakeholder support and facilitating internationalization. Though, little is known about how entrepreneurs construct their identities to gain legitimacy in global markets. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Lebanese entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial identities to build international legitimacy. Drawing on social identity theory and institutional theory, we examine the interplay between legitimacy and internationalization in entrepreneurial ventures. Using a grounded theory approach, this research develops a framework for understanding how legitimacy is acquired and managed throughout a venture's lifecycle. Our findings contribute to entrepreneurship and legitimacy literature by offering insights into the strategic identity work entrepreneurs engage in to enhance their competitiveness in international markets.

Keywords: Legitimacy, Entrepreneurship, Strategies, Internationalization

Introduction

Entrepreneurial legitimacy is a multidimensional construct that has garnered significant attention within entrepreneurship research (Ault & Spicer, 2020). Despite the recognition of entrepreneurship as a legitimate discipline (Katz, 2008), it remains fragmented (Scheidgen, 2021). There is no consensus on a definition or a general theory of entrepreneurship legitimacy (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2019). Various disciplines have attempted to define or conceptualize this construct (Suchman, 1995; Fisher, 2020). Plaza-Casado et al. (2024) argue that legitimacy involves recognizing the social system within which firms and evaluators operate, with variations across countries. Consequently, the conceptual framework for entrepreneurial legitimacy integrates sociological, psychological, and organizational theories to provide a comprehensive understanding (Sánchez, 2011). This diversity of thought has produced distinct schools of thought but has also led to confusion due to the proliferation of definitions and the lack of consensus regarding key concepts in entrepreneurial legitimacy. Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) highlight that existing definitions capture only facets of the phenomenon rather than its entirety. Entrepreneurial legitimacy is shaped by individual behavior while also being influenced by external perceptions (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2019). Tornikoski and Newbert (2007) explore organizational emergence through four dimensions identified by Gartner (1985): the individual, the organization, the environment, and the overall process. They argue that a nascent organization's success depends on attributes considered credible within a societal context, referred to as "conforming legitimacy." Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of persuading stakeholders of an organization's functionality, termed "strategic legitimacy." Organizations that secure legitimacy are more likely to gain stakeholder support (Haack et al., 2021), aligning with Kostova et al. (2008), who contend that legitimacy plays a critical role in internationalization and access to new markets. Entrepreneurs must actively acquire and manage organizational legitimacy to support their venture's growth and expansion (Fisher et al., 2016).

This study aims to bridge the gap in understanding the intersection of legitimacy and internationalization by examining their implications for entrepreneurial identity. The adaptation of a venture's identity is essential for maintaining organizational legitimacy throughout its life cycle (Fisher et al., 2016). Identity is crucial because, first, the identity literature has largely overlooked entrepreneurship as a site of identity construction, and second, entrepreneurial identity can be composed of different legitimacy combinations (Navis & Glynn, 2011). Our central research question is: How do Lebanese entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial identities to build international legitimacy? Prior research on entrepreneur legitimacy and internationalization does not address this question. Given the theoretical ambiguity surrounding Lebanese firms' internationalization, this study addresses the gap by drawing on the legitimacy aspects of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1982) and institutional theory (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Social identity theory relates to entrepreneurial endeavors (Navis & Glynn, 2011), while institutional theory concerns venture legitimation (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Garud et al., 2014). Given the fragmented nature of legitimacy research in management, a structured approach is needed. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) enables theory development based on systematically gathered data (Gioia et al., 2013). This research contributes to understanding how entrepreneurs manage identity and legitimacy, enhancing their competitiveness.

Literature review

During the entrepreneurial commitment phase, individuals establish new benchmarks within their ventures. This phase entails a dual process: legitimacy for oneself and legitimacy for others (Fisher et al., 2016). Self-legitimacy is a personal process, shaped by the entrepreneur's perception of the business environment, personal convictions, and ambitions—factors rooted in biographical background, project achievements, and future projections. External legitimacy, by contrast, is an interpersonal process requiring validation from social groups, often tied to business viability and revenue generation. Legitimacy is critical for business survival, as it strengthens organizational stability (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and facilitates access to resources (Nagy et al., 2012). However, acquiring legitimacy is challenging, as entrepreneurs may lack expertise (De Clercq & Voronov, 2009) or established networks (Hannan & Carroll, 1995). Given these challenges, our research explores strategies that entrepreneurs employ to enhance legitimacy, focusing on Lebanese entrepreneurs navigating international markets. Our key research question is: How do entrepreneurs invest in differentiated strategies to gain legitimacy?

Institutional theory and entrepreneurial legitimacy

Institutional theory provides a sociological lens for understanding entrepreneurial legitimacy, emphasizing the role of social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional pressures in shaping entrepreneurial behavior (Bruton et al., 2010). Entrepreneurs who align their actions with societal norms are more likely to be perceived as legitimate actors (David et al., 2013). Institutional theory helps explain how entrepreneurs secure recognition and credibility in emerging markets, where legitimacy is essential for establishing trust (Delmar & Shane, 2003). Entrepreneurs often craft narratives aligning their ventures with societal values, reinforcing their legitimacy (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). This interplay between institutional theory and entrepreneurial legitimacy highlights the necessity of aligning business practices with social expectations (Bruton et al., 2010).

Legitimacy pillars and strategies

Legitimacy is a multidimensional concept with various typologies (Bitektine, 2011). Suchman (1995) categorizes legitimacy into pragmatic, based on stakeholder interests; moral, rooted in societal norms; and cognitive, reflecting comprehensibility. Cognitive legitimacy is particularly influential, as it shapes collective perceptions of acceptable behavior (Scott, 2010). Neo-institutional theorists argue that

organizations adhere to institutional pressures not solely for efficiency but as a means to validate their activities and secure legitimacy (Fisher et al., 2016). Institutionalization, as per Suchman (1995), equates to legitimacy, as implementing widely accepted practices alters societal perceptions of an organization. Scott (2008) defines three legitimacy pillars: regulative, normative, and cognitive. Understanding these foundational elements contribute in developing effective legitimacy strategies (Suddaby et al., 2017).

Legitimacy mechanisms

Entrepreneurs employ legitimacy strategies to gain stakeholder acceptance, combining multiple strategies sequentially or simultaneously (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Identity mechanisms leverage symbols, narratives, and impression management (Navis & Glynn, 2011), while associative mechanisms rely on networking to enhance credibility (Fisher et al., 2016). Organizational legitimacy depends on institutional conformity and strategic actions, aligning with industry norms to gain trust and support (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Understanding these mechanisms helps entrepreneurs navigating complexities of legitimacy acquisition, ensuring their ventures are recognized, trusted, and accepted in competitive markets.

Methodology

This section aims to establish a methodological framework suited to the research design's specificities, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. Addressing the research phenomenon effectively necessitates a robust methodological approach that facilitates the articulation of theoretical concepts and empirical observations, yielding substantive research contributions. This study adopts an abductive research approach and an interpretative epistemological positioning, contextualizing the relationship between the research subject and researcher. The abductive approach, employing comparative exploratory studies, allows for dynamic theory-building through iterative data collection and analysis. The research methodology includes grounded theory analysis, ensuring conceptual rigor, and an evaluation of knowledge validity. Finally, research limitations and sample specifications are outlined. Given that perception shapes research design, this study employs a qualitative approach, integrating abductive reasoning, grounded theory, and case study methodology (Dadds, 2008).

Understanding social realities necessitates engaging with participants' language, perceptions, and experiences, ensuring contextual accuracy (Gair, 2012). An interpretive approach unveils the complexity of legitimacy-building processes, offering multiple explanatory perspectives. Qualitative researchers seek to observe, describe, understand, and interpret (Gephart, 2004), focusing on contextually rich insights rather than causal explanations. This approach aligns with Geertz's (1973) "thick description", ensuring a detailed interpretation of entrepreneurial legitimacy within its international setting. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) underpins the study, extracting theoretical insights from empirical data. Through iterative coding, theoretical categories emerge, progressively refining the research framework.

Research design, data collection, and interpretation evolve interactively, refining theoretical insights. While theories inform initial inquiries, the study remains open to emerging perspectives (Charmaz, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This approach balances theoretical sensitivity with empirical openness, fostering conceptual innovation. To structure the research, Becker (2005) emphasizes the importance of guiding research with theoretical frameworks while remaining responsive to empirical findings. Flick (2004) asserts that research evolves through engagement with literature and field insights. Theoretical sampling, an essential principle in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), ensures emergent concepts are continuously tested and refined. Given the limited exploration of legitimacy in entrepreneurial internationalization, this research builds upon initial field interactions, progressively shaping its theoretical contributions. The iterative process of abduction and analytic induction fosters continuous refinement, enabling dynamic interaction between data and theory. This research adopts a comparative

exploratory study, examining legitimacy strategies among Lebanese entrepreneurs expanding into international markets. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted across two phases, facilitating in-depth thematic analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). Thematic coding, guided by NVivo 12 software, ensures analytical rigor while maintaining interpretive flexibility. By adopting an interpretative, abductive, and grounded approach, this study provides novel insights into legitimacy-building strategies in international entrepreneurship. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurs construct legitimacy, adapt their identity, and navigate the complexities of global expansion.

Preliminary results

The thematic coding of eight interviews revealed a dynamic interplay of mechanisms through which Lebanese entrepreneurs in the Gulf region navigate legitimacy, market adaptation, and identity formation. Four major dimensions emerged - social networks and diaspora influence, legitimacy construction strategies, institutional and market adaptation, and entrepreneurial identity formation - each contributing distinctively to the process of building and sustaining legitimacy in a foreign context.

Social networks and diaspora influence

Entrepreneurs frequently drew on their diaspora social capital as a means of market entry. Community ties, emotional referrals, and word-of-mouth recommendations served as pivotal enablers of trust, particularly in the early stages of establishing a business presence. The reliance on emotional and community-based referrals was even more pronounced than the strategic use of diaspora networks, indicating that legitimacy often stems from deeply embedded social trust rather than transactional connections. This pattern underscores the socio-relational embeddedness of diaspora entrepreneurs and highlights the value of affective ties in entering legitimacy-sensitive environments. As such, the Lebanese diaspora and professional networks serve as key enablers of international business expansion (Lichy et al., 2021). Many interviewees emphasized how their community connections facilitated funding, market insights, and mentorship. A tech startup founder in Dubai shared: *“my Lebanese network introduced me to venture capitalists that not only invested but also helped me refine my go-to-market strategy”*. Community support is particularly important in industries where business credibility depends on word-of-mouth and reputation. A food and beverage entrepreneur in Dubai stated: *“Lebanese restaurateurs in the UAE played a key role in promoting my brand, connecting me to suppliers, and helping me navigate the licensing process”*. The diaspora also provides strategic partnerships, with a healthcare entrepreneur in Dubai stating: *“I was introduced to a hospital executive through Lebanese professionals in the GCC, which led to our first institutional partnership”*.

Legitimacy construction strategies

Among all categories, legitimacy construction emerged as the most robustly coded theme, with multiple strategies interwoven across interviews. Relational trust and credibility stood out as the most frequently referenced theme, illustrating that entrepreneurs prioritized relationship-building as a primary means of legitimacy acquisition. This relational grounding was complemented by visible markers of legitimacy such as strategic branding, performance-based recognition, and consistent delivery. Branding is equally crucial in legitimacy-building efforts, as public perception shapes consumer trust. A fashion entrepreneur in Riyadh emphasized the role of influencer marketing: *“by collaborating with local influencers and showcasing our designs at high-profile fashion events, we positioned our brand as both innovative and culturally relevant”*. Entrepreneurs employ networking, branding, and strategic positioning to reinforce legitimacy in foreign markets. Professional networks play a key role in business visibility and partnership formation (Johanson & Vahlne, 2011). A business consulting entrepreneur in Dubai shared: *“gaining access to corporate clients required me to build strong relationships within business chambers and*

professional associations in the UAE". Entrepreneurs also adopted formal mechanisms like ethical and regulatory compliance, use of accreditations, and mission-driven narratives to appeal to the moral and cognitive expectations of their host markets. Together, these strategies reflected a dual approach combining soft power (interpersonal trust) and hard credentials (institutional conformity). In competitive markets, operational governance and transparency enhance credibility. A renewable energy entrepreneur in KSA noted: "Saudi Arabia's renewable energy market is highly competitive. Implementing structured governance and securing third-party certifications helped us differentiate ourselves".

Institutional and market adaptation

Legitimacy in international markets is fundamental for entrepreneurs to secure stakeholder trust, regulatory approval, and competitive positioning (Suchman, 1995). To operate successfully within unfamiliar regulatory and cultural fields, entrepreneurs engaged in adaptive strategies that aligned their operations with local expectations. The most notable among these was the integration into entrepreneurial ecosystems through partnerships and accelerators, offering both credibility and local grounding. Additional mechanisms - such as adopting localized operational strategies, aligning with social norms, and fulfilling regulatory requirements - further reinforced their adaptability. These efforts indicate that institutional adaptation is not passive but strategically orchestrated, allowing entrepreneurs to meet host-country expectations while maintaining operational flexibility.

Many interviewees stressed the importance of compliance with industry regulations and obtaining necessary licenses as prerequisites for credibility. A fintech entrepreneur in Riyadh noted: "*without Saudi Central Bank approval, no financial institution would take us seriously. Compliance was our ticket to legitimacy in the market*". Similarly, customer trust plays a vital role in establishing legitimacy (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). A food and beverage entrepreneur in Dubai explained: "*our breakthrough came when a five-star hotel chain featured our organic Lebanese products. That endorsement reassured customers and significantly boosted our credibility*". For businesses operating in sectors with high regulatory barriers, legitimacy is reinforced through certifications and strategic partnerships. A healthcare entrepreneur in Dubai stated: "obtaining accreditation from Dubai Health Authority was the turning point. Without it, hospitals and patients would not have trusted our telemedicine platform".

Entrepreneurial identity formation

Identity was found to be an active, fluid process shaped by the demands and expectations of external environments. A dominant strategy in this domain was adaptive self-positioning, whereby entrepreneurs continuously redefined their identities to resonate with host market values and cultural narratives. Some respondents emphasized cultural identity as a source of entrepreneurial value, using it to differentiate their brand and emphasize authenticity. Others embedded mission-driven elements into their ventures, aligning their businesses with broader societal goals. Collectively, these mechanisms reveal a sense of intentionality in shaping a legitimate entrepreneurial self in alignment with external legitimacy perceptions.

Discussion

This study explores the role of legitimacy, stakeholder trust, strategic branding, and social network support in the success of Lebanese entrepreneurs expanding to the UAE and KSA. The findings align with established literature on institutional legitimacy, international entrepreneurship, and social capital theory, demonstrating that businesses must actively build credibility, visibility, and trust to integrate into foreign markets successfully.

Legitimacy is essential for firms seeking to expand internationally, particularly in highly regulated industries such as finance, healthcare, and food services. Suchman (1995) identifies three dimensions of legitimacy: regulative, normative, and cognitive legitimacy, all of which influence how external stakeholders perceive a business. The findings of this study align with these dimensions, as entrepreneurs emphasized the need for regulatory approvals, certifications, and compliance with local legal frameworks to gain market acceptance. Previous research by Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) highlights that legitimacy is necessary for firms to secure financial resources, reduce operational risks, and enhance credibility. This study confirms that entrepreneurs who secured government approvals and adhered to industry regulations were more successful in gaining stakeholder trust. Furthermore, the findings reinforce Aldrich and Fiol's (1994) argument that new businesses face significant legitimacy constraints, requiring proactive credibility-building efforts, particularly in foreign markets where they lack an established presence.

The study highlights that networking and branding serve as key mechanisms for building legitimacy in foreign markets, reinforcing Johanson and Vahlne's (2011) argument that network-based entry modes facilitate market integration. Entrepreneurs strategically positioned themselves by forming relationships with business associations, regulatory bodies, and key stakeholders. This supports Saxenian's (2006) transnational entrepreneurship model, which suggests that entrepreneurs leverage social and professional networks to facilitate international business expansion and gain credibility.

Branding emerged as a complementary strategy for establishing legitimacy and shaping market perception. This aligns with Keller's (1993) theory of brand equity, which highlights the importance of brand trust, visibility, and perceived expertise in consumer decision-making. The study's findings also align with Cornelissen et al. (2012), who suggest that narrative control and symbolic actions contribute to perceived legitimacy. Entrepreneurs who actively invested in public relations, digital marketing, and strategic partnerships were better positioned to establish credibility in competitive markets. Social networks play a fundamental role in entrepreneurial legitimacy and international market entry, aligning with Burt's (2004) theory of structural holes, which posits that entrepreneurs leverage key network connections to access otherwise unavailable resources. Additionally, this dynamic draws on the legitimacy aspect of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1982), suggesting that entrepreneurs derive credibility and acceptance through group affiliations and collective recognition within professional and diaspora networks. The findings align with Coleman's (1988) theory that social capital enhances entrepreneurial success by facilitating access to investors, mentors, and strategic partners. Entrepreneurs who utilized ethnic business networks and transnational ties gained strategic advantages, confirming Light's (2021) argument that diaspora networks act as facilitators of international business expansion.

Implications and limits

This study offers valuable insights into how Lebanese entrepreneurs establish legitimacy, build stakeholder trust, and leverage social networks while expanding into the UAE and KSA. By analyzing strategies related to regulatory compliance, branding, and professional networks, the findings contribute to international entrepreneurship, institutional legitimacy, and social capital theories. However, the study also presents several limitations, which should be acknowledged to refine future research.

Theoretical and practical implications

The study reinforces the theory of institutional legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) by demonstrating how entrepreneurs gain acceptance in foreign markets through compliance, credibility-building, and branding efforts. It confirms that businesses operating in regulated sectors, such as finance and healthcare, must prioritize certifications, licensing, and government approvals to establish trust and secure market access. This aligns with Aldrich and Fiol's (1994) argument that early-stage firms must actively construct

legitimacy to overcome market skepticism. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that entrepreneurs should integrate regulatory compliance into their business models from inception, as legitimacy significantly influences funding opportunities, business partnerships, and customer trust. The study also underscores the role of strategic branding, supporting Keller's (1993) brand equity model, which posits that consumer trust is shaped by perceived expertise, visibility, and authenticity. Entrepreneurs who successfully implement branding, influencer collaborations, and media exposure enhance their market credibility, reinforcing Cornelissen et al.'s (2012) perspective that narrative control influences legitimacy perceptions.

The study also expands on social capital theory, demonstrating that network-based market entry strategies (Johanson & Vahlne, 2011) play a key role in facilitating international expansion. Entrepreneurs who engage in industry networking, diaspora connections, and transnational partnerships gain critical advantages in navigating foreign business environments. This supports Light's (2021) research on ethnic business networks as enablers of international entrepreneurship, illustrating that diaspora support, referrals, and funding opportunities are pivotal in gaining credibility in new markets.

Limitations of the study

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample size is limited to Lebanese entrepreneurs expanding to the UAE and KSA, which restricts the generalizability of findings to other nationalities or regional contexts. Future studies should expand the sample to include entrepreneurs from different backgrounds operating in diverse international markets. Second, the study primarily focuses on qualitative interviews, which, while offering rich insights, may be subject to bias in self-reported experiences. Future research should complement qualitative data with quantitative analysis, such as survey-based studies measuring legitimacy outcomes, financial performance, and consumer perceptions. Additionally, the study does not explore the long-term sustainability of legitimacy strategies. While entrepreneurs describe initial success through compliance, branding, and networking, further research should examine how these factors influence long-term business growth and resilience in competitive markets.

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