



Identification and Ranking of Factors Affecting the Legitimacy of Entrepreneurial Businesses with Emphasis on Individual Decision-Making

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Individual decision-making by entrepreneurs plays a significant role in determining the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses. Accordingly, the aim of this research was to identify and rank the factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with an emphasis on individual decision-making. This research was applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of execution method. The study population included managers of industrial companies in Kermanshah city in the year 2024-2025. From this population, using purposive snowball sampling until theoretical saturation was reached, 14 individuals were selected as experts from among industrial, service, and agricultural managers. Required data were collected through two methods: library research and field research (interviews). For the validity and reliability of the present study, Lincoln and Guba's criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were utilized. The Delphi research findings indicated the identification and ranking of factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with an emphasis on individual decision-making factors, including judgmental view, the risk of social sanctions, social awareness, economic stakes, and a lack of trust. Thus, the results demonstrated that individual decision-making can play a major role in the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses. Accordingly, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) should design programs to increase public trust and reduce social risks to provide a suitable environment for the growth of entrepreneurial businesses.

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Introduction

Today, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), at the heart of which are entrepreneurs (Fotuhi Ardakani & Khojasteh Avergani, 2024), play a key role in the economy of society (Azami et al., 2024). Legitimizing such entrepreneurial businesses, as a fundamental concept in strategic management and socio-economic studies, is a vital factor for the survival of organizations in today's complex environments (Moradinejad et al., 2024). This construct, defined as the collective perception of the desirability and appropriateness of an entity's actions within the framework of social norms (Zhao et al., 2020), equips companies with high legitimacy with superior performance outcomes and facilitated access to vital resources (i.e., capital, talent, and technology) (Florent et al., 2021). This reinforcing cycle transforms legitimacy into a strategic asset that creates sustainable competitive advantage (Bitektine, 2011). Accordingly, an extensive body of literature has formed in the domain of legitimacy, focusing on gaining initial legitimacy (Cho et al., 2010), expanding it to higher levels (Uberbacher, 2014), and linking it to resource access (Higgins & Gulati, 2006). However, there is a significant research gap regarding the neglect of the role of the individual and individual decision-making in legitimacy evaluation. Although research (Liang et al., 2021) confirms that "legitimacy is evaluated by individuals," most studies focus on the macro level and organizational structures, ignoring individual cognitive processes (Díez-Martín et al., 2018). This is while understanding individual evaluations is essential for analyzing the dynamics of collective legitimacy granting (Bitektine, 2011). Therefore, the role of the individual in legitimacy evaluation is complex and multi-level (macro and micro), although these complexities make achieving theoretical consensus difficult.

At the macro level, evaluators judge the credibility of entrepreneurial businesses based on their conformity with social norms and expectations (Tänkebe et al., 2016). This level is influenced by collective factors (i.e., policies and media), and individuals sometimes consider conformity with norms as a criterion despite personal disagreement (Shiri et al., 2022; Saddabi et al., 2017).

At the micro level, individuals evaluate the appropriateness of activities based on personal experiences, specialized knowledge, and values (Voronov & Yorks, 2015). These evaluations are influenced by individual decision-making, which is itself the product of collective pressures, cognitive biases, and emotions (Shiri & Badpa, 2024; Shiri et al., 2021; Locke et al., 2015).

Considering the above, the complexities within the socio-economic context of Iran heighten the importance of examining the role of individual decision-making. On the one hand, extensive international sanctions and economic instability have exposed Iran's business environment to high uncertainty and a lack of trust in institutions (Roshanzadeh et al., 2020). Under these conditions, managers' decisions regarding the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses are shaped not only based on economic criteria but also under the influence of survival considerations and risk management. This phenomenon can be termed "conditional legitimacy," where legitimacy evaluation is tied to environmental

conditions and perceived risks. With such a situation in Iran, where the business environment is accompanied by specific uncertainties and turbulences (Naderi et al., 2025a; 2025b), studying the industries of Kermanshah province can serve as an important and unique example for examining this subject. This is because Kermanshah, as an industrial hub in the west of the country with sectors such as industrial, service, agricultural conversion, and textile industries, is under the influence of consequences of sanctions (limitations in accessing raw materials and decreased exports) (Iran Statistics Center, 2023), internal challenges (currency fluctuations and inflation and liquidity shortages) (Moradi et al., 2025), and limitations (structural, knowledge, and communication) (Korang Beheshti et al., 2025). Accordingly, managers of these industries face complex decisions (selecting suppliers and determining pricing strategies) which, in a context of uncertainty, can directly affect the legitimacy and survival of entrepreneurial businesses.

This research, by focusing on the role of individual decision-making in legitimacy evaluation, seeks to identify and rank the factors affecting this process.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is based on three key theories:

Institutional Legitimacy Theory defines legitimacy as the collective perception of an organization's conformity with social norms and values (Kostova et al., 2008), stating that to gain legitimacy, organizations must align with the environment at three functional levels: utility (usefulness), moral (correctness of methods), and cognitive (understandability) (Hamdan et al., 2025; Dehyadegari et al., 2025).

Multi-level Legitimacy Assessment Model analyzes evaluation at two levels: macro—"judgment based on conformity with collective norms influenced by institutions, media, and politics" (Tänkebe et al., 2016)—and micro—"evaluation of the appropriateness of activities based on individual experiences and values" (Voronov & Yorks, 2015); this model shows how the interaction between these levels complicates achieving theoretical consensus (Saddabi et al., 2017).

Social Judgment Theory focuses on individual cognitive processes in legitimacy evaluation, considering individual decision-making not only influenced by cognitive biases (such as confirmation and availability) and collective pressures and emotions (Muchnik et al., 2013), but also explaining why individual evaluations in conditions of uncertainty (such as sanctions) may distance themselves from rational criteria (Khoshmaram & Raoufi, 2025; Bitektine, 2011). In Iran, these theories are integrated with the concept of "conditional legitimacy," a condition where legitimacy evaluation is heavily tied to environmental risks (sanctions, instability) and institutional distrust (Roshanzadeh et al., 2020). By combining these theories, the present framework fills the research gap arising from neglecting the role of the individual in legitimacy evaluation (Miotto et al., 2020). In the following, the theoretical foundations of the research will be discussed.

Legitimacy of Entrepreneurial Businesses

In today's world, innovative businesses are recognized as the engines of economic growth (Feizollahi et al., 2024), and in most countries, improving (Ahangari et al.,

2024) and legitimizing them is not only important but also necessary (Saeedi, 2024); however, the root of this legitimization must be traced back to the history of human economic and social activities. In the contemporary world, the recent wave of bankruptcies and financial scandals in organizations has sharply increased attention to proper governance, the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses, and social responsibility (Kwak et al., 2019). These developments show that companies must act beyond profit maximization and pay special attention to the social and economic impacts of their decisions on stakeholders (Ferreira et al., 2023). Commercial companies—similar to government organizations—have realized that, in addition to economic behaviors, they must also pay attention to legitimacy-oriented behaviors. This means that companies must operate in a way that, while securing economic interests, they should also contribute to creating social values and maintaining public trust (Miotto et al., 2020). Therefore, simultaneous attention to legitimacy and economic objectives is the only way to achieve sustainable goals and to guarantee the survival of organizations in the future. Managers at various organizational levels deal with the issue of legitimacy. Their daily decisions—from resource allocation and employee performance evaluation to selecting new technologies and dealing with personnel—have direct impacts on the company's legitimacy (Roussy et al., 2021). This matter has acquired vital importance in today's working world, which is faced with technological challenges and changing social expectations. Companies' long-term policies and programs also require extensive social considerations; ignoring these considerations can lead to human catastrophes, social dissatisfaction, decreased public trust, and even environmental damage (Ferreira et al., 2023). Therefore, organizations must be designed and executed in a way that, while achieving economic goals, they should also contribute to social welfare. In management literature, various definitions have been provided for the conditions of entrepreneurial business legitimacy. Liu and Cao (2023) consider the legitimacy space a vital part of organizational culture that simultaneously affects employee projects and work efficiency. This view indicates that organizational culture and legitimacy are intertwined, and that the existence of one without the other is impossible. Rosser et al. (2020) define legitimacy as patterns guiding employee behavior, manifested in the form of policies, procedures, and ethical standards. These patterns help employees make their decisions within legitimate frameworks. Urby et al. (2019) also consider legitimacy conditions as the public perception of specific company functions that have legitimacy content; this perception can have a direct impact on the organization's credibility and public trust. Ultimately, the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses depends not only on economic performance but also on society's perception and impact on stakeholders. To achieve sustainable success, organizations must formulate their strategies based on the principles of legitimacy and social responsibility.

Individual Decision-Making

One of the important issues in managing an organization is the subject of decision-making (Dorkandi & Khademradi, 2019) which enables the selection of

appropriate solutions when facing challenges, and its key feature is awareness of its structured process (Pitaras et al., 2020). This process includes the stages of defining the problem, gathering and analyzing information with an emphasis on reliable sources (Tan et al., 2016), identifying and evaluating options considering advantages and disadvantages, selecting and executing the superior option, and finally evaluating the results and revising if necessary (Pitaras et al., 2024). Beyond these stages, numerous individual and environmental factors influence decision-making. At the individual level, personality traits (thinking style, risk-taking, attitude toward success/failure) (Wong et al., 2019), specialized knowledge and access to valid information (Sun et al., 2024), communication skills and ability to exchange views (Stipinovich et al., 2023), and balanced self-confidence (avoiding excess toward narcissism) (Singh et al., 2024) play a decisive role. Also, cognitive and emotional factors such as cognitive biases (confirmation bias, availability bias) and momentary emotions may lead to irrational decisions (Garon et al., 2024). At the environmental level, culture, social values, laws, and group pressures (Efkenmann et al., 2022) also shape the decision-making framework. Ultimately, individual decision-making is a dynamic and multi-dimensional process that is the result of the complex interaction of intra-individual (cognitive, emotional) and extra-individual (social, structural) factors; therefore, to achieve effective decision-making, while being aware of this process, individuals must focus on managing influencing factors and reducing cognitive biases (Maarefvand & Mansouri, 2025; Hosseini & MalehMir Chegini, 2024; Talakdar et al., 2018).

Legitimacy of Entrepreneurial Businesses with Emphasis on Individual Decision-Making

The legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses, as a multi-dimensional subject, has always been the focus of theoretical and practical discussions, and individual decision-making plays a determining role in shaping it (Megersson & Burke, 2019). Every individual, in the stages of establishing or managing entrepreneurial businesses, faces fundamental questions, the answers to which directly affect legitimacy; the most important of these questions is: "Do these businesses have legitimacy from a social, ethical, and legal perspective?" (Acuti et al., 2023). This challenge becomes particularly vital in complex fields such as emerging technologies or nascent industries, because in these areas, laws and regulations often lag behind the speed of changes, making the recognition of legitimacy ambiguous. Under such conditions, managers must evaluate legitimacy multi-dimensionally with precision and scholarly rigor, which includes compliance with laws, environmental and social impacts, adaptation to ethical principles, and alignment with cultural values. Furthermore, potential consequences for stakeholders (customers, employees, shareholders, and the community) must be at the center of attention (Malik et al., 2024). Complexity becomes apparent when managers face ethical-economic conflicts. In such cases, decision-making requires deep reflection and prioritization of values based on fundamental principles (Roshanzadeh et al., 2020). In conditions where legitimacy is not completely transparent, managers must reach informed and responsible decisions through

systematic information gathering, multi-dimensional analysis, and consultation with specialists. Ultimately, considering that the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses is a dynamic construct shaped under the influence of individual judgments, managers are obliged to conduct comprehensive evaluations with social responsibility and a holistic attitude to realize ethical and sustainable decision-making.

Research Background

Fotouhi Ardakani and Khojasteh Avorgani (2024) showed in a study that individual and organizational factors play a significant role in entrepreneurs' decision-making by affecting the specific characteristics of a decision. Also, there is a two-way relationship between individual and organizational characteristics, and these factors directly influence each other in the decision-making process.

Doroudi and Mirzaei (2022) stated that the most important components of individual decision-making by managers of government organizations, in order of priority, are: precise definition of the problem, high motivation and self-confidence, individual knowledge and experience, effective timing, timely and complete design and implementation of decisions, and experimental (limited) implementation before final (public) implementation.

Alamshahi et al. (2021) stated that factors related to the individual decision-making process, organizational factors, and factors related to the decision-maker play the most important role in making ineffective decisions, respectively.

In an empirical study, Zimmer et al. (2025) examined the factors affecting the delegation behavior of entrepreneurs. Findings show that entrepreneurs are more inclined to delegate decision-making authority to employees whom they consider capable and trustworthy. Furthermore, in conditions where workload is high, delegation is encouraged; conversely, high perceived risk in investment can be a barrier to this delegation. Also, it was found that high ambition in entrepreneurs is associated with less delegation of authority.

Halleck and McKinney (2025) examined the role of the entrepreneurial founder in shaping the legitimacy of a new venture and how employees affect this legitimacy. This study, conducted through a literature review, suggests that the founder's footprint affects the company's legitimacy, and that inefficient employee behaviors can damage the development of new venture legitimacy.

Hamdan et al. (2025) examined the impact of cultural dimensions on entrepreneurial decision-making. Key findings indicate that cultural values significantly moderate entrepreneurial behavior in critical areas. In individualistic cultures, there is a greater tendency for independent and risk-taking decision-making, whereas in collectivist cultures, group consensus and coordination are prioritized. Also, cultural tolerance for uncertainty is directly related to the tendency of entrepreneurs to experiment and adapt in unstable market environments.

Adomako et al. (2025) assessed the impact of responsible entrepreneurship on social legitimacy and identified intervening factors. Findings indicate a positive impact of responsible entrepreneurship on social legitimacy. Furthermore, this

relationship becomes stronger when customer demand is high and ethical expectations and social responsibility in consumers have intensified. Also, market turbulence plays a reinforcing role in the relationship between responsible entrepreneurship and social legitimacy by highlighting responsible actions in the face of social and environmental challenges.

Koziol-Nadolna and Beyer (2021) found that to improve the quality of organizational decisions, managers should not focus solely on financial or technical data, but they must understand and manage the interaction between decision-makers' individual characteristics, organizational context, and environmental conditions. Presenting this model provides a framework for analyzing decision-making processes in different organizations.

Díez-Martín et al. (2018) evaluated organizational legitimacy from the perspective of low-trust customers. Their findings indicate that a high level of judgmental view can influence this evaluation. Although these results show the importance of considering social factors, they reveal the necessity for a deeper examination of the role of these factors in the decision-making process.

Saddabi et al. (2017), by examining individual dimensions such as judgmental view and risk-taking, showed that these characteristics affect legitimacy-based performance. However, sole focus on correcting the decision-making process and ignoring social and cultural dimensions can entail limitations in improving decision quality.

Research in the field of identifying and ranking factors affecting business legitimacy with emphasis on individual decision-making, while addressing key components such as correct problem definition and managers' self-confidence, has not addressed some important aspects. In particular, environmental and social impacts, which can affect the decision-making process and legitimacy, have not been sufficiently considered. Also, there is a need for a more precise examination of the relationship between individual factors and social pressures, as these factors can affect the quality of decisions. Ultimately, the modification of decision-making processes should be carried out in a way that considers social and cultural dimensions to achieve positive effects on the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses. Overall, existing approaches require expansion and greater depth to be able to analyze all dimensions affecting legitimacy well.

Research Method

The present research, aiming to achieve applied results in the field of individual decision-making related to the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses, was designed as a qualitative study with an exploratory-descriptive approach. The study population included managers of industrial companies in Kermanshah city in the year 2024, who played a key role in decision-making processes and business legitimacy due to their relevant expertise and experience. For sample selection, purposive snowball sampling was used. The sampling process began with the selection of the first manager, chosen based on criteria of management experience in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Kermanshah and expertise in the field of legitimacy. Subsequent experts were selected based on recommendations

from previous experts and criteria of at least five years of management experience and knowledge—because experienced managers can make different and important decisions. The final sample size included 14 experts, continuing until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that data collection continued until new data no longer added fresh information to previous findings. Data analysis was performed based on the Delphi technique. This technique is used in qualitative studies, especially to identify and prioritize complex variables. The analysis process involves collecting multi-stage opinions from experts, qualitative content analysis, and group feedback to reach a consensus on research topics. This approach allows for obtaining deep managerial perspectives and valid results that can serve as a basis for improving decision-making processes in industries. To ensure validity and reliability, the Lincoln & Guba evaluation method was used, which includes four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For credibility, researchers devoted sufficient time to confirming the research process and used different specialists for evaluation. For this purpose, two coders were employed to code interview samples to confirm the consistency of views. For transferability, three independent specialists were consulted regarding the findings to ensure the results are transferable. Dependability was ensured by accurately recording research details and notes. Finally, for confirmability, all details and documents related to the research stages, including the full text of the interviews, were carefully preserved.

Results

Demographic information of the sample members includes 14 experts in this field, as presented in the table below:

Table 1. Demographic Information of Sample Members

row	Gender	Work Experience	Education	Age	Company Type
1	male	10 years	Master's Degree	50	Industry
2	male	7 years	Master's Degree	30	
3	male	8 years	Master's Degree	32	
4	male	13 years	Master's Degree	37	
5	male	12 years	PhD	38	Services
6	male	10 years	Master's Degree	38	
7	male	7 years	Bachelor's Degree	35	
8	male	15 years	Master's Degree	50	
9	male	9 years	Bachelor's Degree	42	
10	male	7 years	Bachelor's Degree	36	
11	male	14 years	Master's Degree	51	Agriculture
12	male	15 years	Master's Degree	49	
13	male	14 years	Master's Degree	45	
14	male	8 years	Master's Degree	36	

As seen in the table above, all sample members were male, with education ranging from Bachelor's to PhD. Also, the work experience range was seven to 15 years, and the age range of the sample individuals was 30 to 50 years.

Question 1: What are the factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with emphasis on individual decision-making?

In open coding, first a conceptual name is assigned to meaningful units of data, and then, using more abstract names, the obtained concepts are categorized, and

these categories are called categories. In the next stage, by analyzing the data, the characteristics and dimensions of the obtained categories are developed. Of course, these stages are not linear and usually occur simultaneously with much overlap. At this stage, the researcher, by reviewing the collected dataset, attempts to identify the concepts latent in the interviews. This stage is called open coding because the researcher names the concepts with an open mind and imposes no restrictions on determining the codes. The purpose of open coding is to decompose the collected qualitative dataset into the smallest possible conceptual components. In the following tables, open coding is described and examined. In open coding, the smallest conceptual units in the collected qualitative data through interviews are extracted based on the levels of factors examined with an exploratory approach. Table 2 describes and examines open coding. In open coding, first a conceptual name is assigned to meaningful units of data, and then, using more abstract names, the obtained concepts are categorized, and these categories are called categories. In the next stage, by analyzing the data, the characteristics and dimensions of the obtained categories are developed. Of course, these stages are not linear and usually occur simultaneously with much overlap. At this stage, the researcher, by reviewing the collected dataset, attempts to identify the concepts latent in the interviews. This stage is called open coding because the researcher names the concepts with an open mind and imposes no restrictions on determining the codes. The purpose of open coding is to decompose the collected qualitative dataset into the smallest possible conceptual components. In the following tables, open coding is described and examined. In open coding, the smallest conceptual units in the collected qualitative data through interviews are extracted based on the levels of factors examined with an exploratory approach. Table 3 describes and examines open coding.

Table 2. Open Coding Resulting from Research Interviews

Row	Interview Excerpt	Open Codes	Document Reference
1	Environmental threats and opportunities affect individual decision-making.		Interview 4
2	Attaining stakeholder satisfaction and managing social sanctions affect decision-making.		Interview 2
3	Lack of resources due to social sanctions risk limits decision-making.		Interview 3
4	Economic and socio-political conditions affected by sanctions govern decision-making.		Interview 5
5	Cooperation with civil society organizations is essential to address sanctions risk.	1- Risk of social sanctions	Interview 7
6	The consequences of social sanctions have a direct impact on decision-making.		Interview 6
7	The high-risk environment caused by sanctions complicates decision-making.		Interview 9
8	The development of social sanctions risk affects decision-making.		Interview 10
9	Government regulations for managing sanctions risk form the decision-making framework.		Interview 1
10	Social awareness corrects negative judgments by reducing misunderstandings.	2- Social awareness	Interview 9

Row	Interview Excerpt	Open Codes	Document Reference
11	A culture of awareness-generating beliefs and values affects decision-making.		Interview 8
12	The social awareness of individuals at the individual level affects decision-making.		Interview 10
13	Managers' social awareness is one of the key factors in decision-making.		Interview 11
14	Social awareness and information play a role in organizational knowledge management.		Interview 14
15	Managers' social awareness and commitment to the company affect decision-making.		Interview 12
16	Up-to-date and advanced technology is effective in decision-making.		Interview 13
17	Transformational orientation affects decision-making in increasing organizational awareness.		Interview 2
18	Unit participation is essential for increasing social awareness.		Interview 6
19	Employee cooperation is effective in increasing social awareness in decision-making.		Interview 6
20	Job status resulting from social awareness affects decision-making.		Interview 11
21	Employee awareness at the individual level is effective in decision-making.		Interview 8
22	The ability to accept social issues and to be aware of emotions affects decision-making.		Interview 11
23	The ability to think socially has a direct effect on decision-making.		Interview 3
24	Motivation and self-confidence in recognizing social issues are effective in decision-making.		Interview 11
25	The social method perspective dominates decision-making.		Interview 12
26	Perceptual errors (such as confirmation bias) lead to ignoring evidence against legitimacy.		Interview 5
27	Knowledge about the organization and its surroundings affects judgments.		Interview 8
28	Individual knowledge and experience affect decision-making.		Interview 11
29	Alignment of individual and organizational goals affects decision-making.		Interview 5
30	Focus on the task dominates decision-making.		Interview 9
31	A judgmental perspective has a direct impact on decision-making.	3- Judgmental view	Interview 1
32	Correct problem definition and judgmental vision improve decision-making.		Interview 3
33	Clarity of mission, vision, and strategies affect judgments.		Interview 13
34	Effective communication between the decision-making system and research improves judgments.		Interview 2
35	Centralization of decision-making affects judgments due to lack of trust in subordinates.		Interview 14
36	The absence of political issues in decision-making increases legitimacy.		Interview 11
37	Design, monitoring, and control of organizational processes affect decision-making.		Interview 11
38	The dominance of a traditional and limited attitude towards organizational issues affects decision-making.	4- Process factors	Interview 12
39	The culture of accountability and responsibility for previous decisions affects decision-making.		Interview 9

Row	Interview Excerpt	Open Codes	Document Reference
40	The size of the company affects decision-making.		Interview 2
41	The transparency of company processes affects decision-making.		Interview 2
42	The existence of a standard decision-making procedure affects decision-making.		Interview 11
43	Identifying the problem and designing solutions affect decision-making.		Interview 6
44	System integration affects decision-making.		Interview 5
45	Lack of trust and the decision-making system's not keeping up with environmental developments affect decision-making.		Interview 2
46	Lack of trust in guidance mechanisms and creating coordination affects decision-making.		Interview 10
47	Lack of trust in executive guarantees for implementing decisions affects decision-making.		Interview 2
48	Lack of trust in qualitative dimensions and lack of attention to administrative and quantitative aspects affect decision-making.	5- Lack of trust	Interview 9
49	Planning is good on paper, but it is not implemented because managers are not trusted.		Interview 8
50	Lack of trust in coordination with other relevant organizations affects decision-making.		Interview 4
51	Lack of trust in decision-making timing and implementation mechanisms affects decision-making.		Interview 2
52	Trial execution of decisions before final implementation affects decision-making.		Interview 3
53	Decision-making is not a completely rational process, and emotions play an important role.		Interview 2
54	Emotional states (fear, happiness, anger) affect the decision-making process.	6- Personal feelings	Interview 7
55	Developing strategies to overcome decision-making challenges is essential.		Interview 4
56	Past positive outcomes create a tendency to repeat similar decision-making.	7- Past experiences	Interview 7
57	People tend to avoid repeating past mistakes.		Interview 9
58	Individual differences (age, social status, cognitive abilities) affect decision-making.		Interview 6
59	Age, socio-economic status, and cognitive abilities affect decision-making.	8- Individual differences	Interview 12
60	Older people have fewer choices, and young people make poorer decisions due to their inexperience.		Interview 8
61	Personality and psychological factors affect individuals and customers.	9 Personality traits	Interview 11
62	Creative marketing allows for the exploitation of emotions.		Interview 3
63	At the heart of every decision is an emotion such as fear, happiness, or desire.		Interview 11
64	Decision-making may be influenced by overcommitment.	10- Level of commitment	Interview 9
65	Individuals will spend time, money, and effort on a decision to which they are committed.		Interview 6
66	Effective communication regarding economic equity between the decision-making system and research is essential.	11- Economic stakes	Interview 4
67	Integration of economic equity influences decision-making.		Interview 3
68	Accurate identification of economic equity activities influences decision-making.		Interview 7

In this research, 11 indicators were first selected as criteria. The main criteria are: 1. Judgmental View, 2. Risk of Social Sanctions, 3. Social Awareness, 4. Economic Stakes, 5. Process Factors, 6. Lack of Trust, 7. Individual Emotions, 8. Past Experiences, 9. Individual Differences, 10. Personality Traits, and 11. Level of Commitment. A summary of the Delphi technique results using the opinions of 14 experts is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the Delphi Questionnaire - First Stage

	Judgmental perspective	Risk of social sanctions	Social awareness	Economic stakes	Process factors	Lack of trust	Personal feelings	Past experiences	Individual differences	Personality traits	Commitment level
Expert1	5	3	5	5	4	4	5	5	3	4	5
Expert2	5	2	5	5	5	4	3	4	3	5	3
Expert3	4	4	4	4	3	5	2	4	4	4	4
Expert4	5	3	4	5	3	5	4	3	4	3	3
Expert5	3	5	3	5	2	5	5	5	5	4	1
Expert6	4	4	4	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	4
Expert7	5	3	4	5	3	5	3	3	5	3	4
Expert8	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	5	4	5	2
Expert9	3	3	3	5	3	5	3	3	3	3	4
Expert10	2	3	3	4	4	5	3	3	3	3	3
Expert11	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	5	4	4
Expert12	5	3	4	3	4	3	3	2	3	3	4
Expert13	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	3	4
Expert14	5	4	3	4	5	4	4	4	4	3	3
Average	4.45	4.80	4.30	4.05	3.65	4.91	4.76	3.55	4.65	4.00	4.55
Status	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance	Rejection	Acceptance	Acceptance	Rejection	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance

In this section, the results, based on the average of 11 indicators reviewed by experts, showed that nine indicators had an average higher than 4 and were selected for the next stage. It should be noted that scoring refers to the process of evaluating and assigning a number to a specific criterion or feature. Here, the scores are given numerically on a Likert scale (e.g., from 1 to 5) by experts to measure their views and judgments on various factors. In this case, high scores (4 and 5) indicate a positive view and acceptance of the factor under consideration. These scores indicate that experts believe in the importance or positive impact of that factor. Medium scores (3) indicate uncertainty or conflicting opinions. Experts may not have a clear opinion on this matter. Low scores (1 and 2) indicate a negative view or rejection. These scores clearly indicate concern or disbelief in the importance of the factor in question.

Table4. Results from the Delphi questionnaire - Second Stage

	Judgmental perspective	Risk of social sanctions	Social awareness	Economic stakes	Process factors	Commitment level	Individual differences	Personality traits	Lack of trust
Expert1	4	5	5	4	5	3	4	3	4
Expert2	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	3	5
Expert3	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	5
Expert4	3	5	5	4	5	4	5	3	3
Expert5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	5
Expert6	5	5	4	4	3	3	4	4	5
Expert7	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	3
Expert8	4	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4
Expert9	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	5	5
Expert10	5	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	5
Expert11	4	3	4	4	5	4	4	5	4
Expert12	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4
Expert13	4	5	4	4	3	3	3	4	4
Expert14	5	4	3	2	3	2	2	3	5
Average	4.35	4.86	4.81	4.29	4.33	3.62	3.19	3.48	4.35
Status	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance	Rejection	Rejection	Rejection	Acceptance

The results of the above table show the average rank of the indicators evaluated in the second stage of Delphi. As can be seen, out of the nine indicators examined, six indicators including judgmental view, risk of social sanctions, social awareness, economic stakes, process factors, and lack of trust were accepted with an average higher than 4 and were evaluated for the third stage of Delphi and the ranking of the factors.

Table 5. Results from the Delphi questionnaire - Third Stage

	Judgmental perspective	Risk of social sanctions	Process factors	Social awareness	Economic stakes	Lack of trust
Expert1	5	5	3	5	5	4
Expert2	5	5	5	5	4	5
Expert3	5	5	4	5	5	3
Expert4	5	5	4	5	5	4
Expert5	4	3	3	3	3	3
Expert6	5	5	4	3	4	4
Expert7	5	4	4	5	4	5
Expert8	5	5	3	5	5	5
Expert9	4	5	4	3	4	4
Expert10	4	5	3	4	4	4
Expert11	5	4	3	5	4	3
Expert12	5	4	5	4	4	5
Expert13	4	5	4	4	4	3
Expert14	4	4	3	4	4	5
Average	4.64	4.57	3.71	4.28	4.21	4.07
Status	Acceptance	Acceptance	Rejection	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance

As can be seen, at the end of the Delphi analysis, five factors were obtained as factors affecting business legitimacy with an emphasis on individual decision-making, as follows: 1- Judgmental view, 2- Risk of social sanctions, 3- Social awareness, 4- Economic stakes, and 5- Lack of trust. Also, to rank these criteria and calculate the consistency of experts' views, the Kendall agreement coefficient was used, as shown in the following tables:

Table 6. Kendall agreement coefficient in the three stages of the Delphi technique

Stage	Number of Indices	Number of Experts	Kendall Coefficient	Degree of freedom	Significance
First stage	9	14	0.352	10	0.000
Second stage	6	14	0.523	5	0.000
Third stage	5	17	0.681	4	0.000

Based on the results of Table 6, the value of the Kendall coefficient obtained in the first stage of the Delphi technique shows that the consensus among the experts' views is good. Also, the significance level is 0.000, that is, ($p < 0.001$), which shows that the results obtained can be relied on with 95% confidence. The Kendall coefficient in the second stage of the Delphi technique is 0.523, which shows that the consensus among the experts' views is good. Also, the significance level is 0.000, that is, ($p < 0.001$), which shows that the results obtained can be relied on with 95% confidence. The Kendall coefficient in the third stage of the Delphi technique is 0.681, which shows that the consensus among the experts' views is high. Also, the significance level is 0.000, that is, ($p < 0.001$), which shows that the results obtained can be relied on with 95% confidence. Therefore, the Delphi technique was stopped and the prioritization of indicators was examined based on their weight in the next stage.

Question 2: How is the ranking of factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with an emphasis on individual decision-making?

Also, based on the average rank for the indicators accepted in the third stage of Delphi, the prioritization of indicators can be expressed according to the following table:

Table 7. Prioritization of indicators obtained from the third stage of the Delphi technique

Index	Priority Index	Average Rank
Judgmental Vision	First	4.64
Risk of Social Sanctions	Second	4.57
Social Awareness	Third	4.28
Economic Shares	Fourth	4.21
Lack of Trust	Fifth	4.07

Based on the results of the ranking test and the Kendall correlation coefficient, the prioritization of the indicators extracted from the third Delphi stage, from the first to fifth priority, is equal to 1- Judgmental perspective, 2- Risk of social sanctions, 3- Social awareness, 4- Economic stakes, and 5- Lack of trust.

Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned, the aim of the research was to identify and rank the factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with emphasis on individual decision-making. Accordingly, the researchers sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with

emphasis on individual decision-making?

Considering the materials presented in the Delphi technique, five factors were obtained as factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with emphasis on individual decision-making, which include: 1. Judgmental View, 2. Risk of Social Sanctions, 3. Social Awareness, 4. Economic Stakes, and 5. Lack of Trust. These results are consistent with the research of Fotouhi Ardakani and Khojasteh Avorgani (2024), Doroudi and Mirzaei (2022), Alamshahi et al. (1400), Zimmer et al. (2025), Halleck and McKinney (2025), Hamdan et al. (2025), Adomako et al. (2025), Koziol-Nadolna and Beyer (2021), Díez-Martín et al. (2018), and Saddabi et al. (2017).

In explaining the findings, it can be said that the first factor is Judgmental View which refers to how individuals evaluate and judge situations and decisions of entrepreneurial businesses. These views can have a profound impact on the public perception of the legitimacy of an entrepreneurial business, because positive judgments can increase the credibility of entrepreneurial businesses and negative judgments can lead to a decrease in public trust. The second factor is Risk of Social Sanctions. This factor relates to the social consequences arising from the decisions of entrepreneurial businesses. If decisions lead to public dissatisfaction or negative social reactions, they can jeopardize the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses. Therefore, considering the social consequences of every decision is essential. The third factor is Social Awareness which refers to the level of public knowledge and information about social and economic issues. The higher the social awareness, the more likely individuals are to pay attention to the positive or negative impacts of entrepreneurial businesses in their decision-making, and this can affect their legitimacy. The fourth factor is Economic Stakes. This factor refers to the financial and economic impacts arising from the decisions of entrepreneurial businesses. Entrepreneurial businesses that act in favor of the local or national economy will typically have greater legitimacy. Finally, Lack of Trust refers to the public lack of trust in various systems and institutions. This factor can have a negative impact on the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses, because if individuals do not trust the economic or managerial system, they most likely will not trust the decisions of entrepreneurial businesses either.

Overall, these five factors indicate the complexity of the individual decision-making process regarding the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses, and it is recommended that managers and decision-makers consider these factors to be able to make more effective decisions. In other words, in Kermanshah, five factors affect the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses. The judgmental view refers to how people evaluate businesses, and in this province, businesses that align with local values and norms gain more credibility. The risk of social sanctions also relates to the negative consequences arising from economic decisions that can endanger the legitimacy of businesses. Social awareness refers to the level of public knowledge about economic and social issues, and increasing this awareness can help improve the quality of decision-making. Economic stakes relate to the financial and economic impacts of businesses in the local community, and businesses that contribute to job creation and improved economic conditions

usually have more legitimacy. Finally, Lack of Trust refers to the public lack of trust in various systems and institutions which can have a negative impact on the legitimacy of businesses. In general, recognizing and paying attention to these factors can help entrepreneurs make more effective decisions and contribute to sustainable economic and social development in Kermanshah.

2. How is the ranking of factors affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with emphasis on individual decision-making?

Based on the results of the ranking test and the Kendall correlation coefficient, the prioritization of indicators affecting the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses with emphasis on individual decision-making was determined respectively as: 1. Judgmental View, 2. Risk of Social Sanctions, 3. Social Awareness, 4. Economic Stakes, and 5. Lack of Trust. These findings are in line with those of Díez-Martín et al. (2018) and Nicholas et al. (2017). In these framework, the judgmental view, as the first priority, highlights the central role of individuals' subjective judgments regarding the performance of entrepreneurial businesses in shaping legitimacy. The risk of social sanctions in the second rank shows the importance of preventing immediate social consequences (such as consumer boycotts or public protests). Social awareness in the third place confirms the role of public knowledge about the activities of entrepreneurial businesses in reducing misunderstandings and strengthening legitimacy. Economic stakes, as the fourth factor, emphasize the long-term impact of financial and economic performance of organizations. Finally, Lack of Trust, despite its fundamental importance, was placed in a lower priority as a background factor; however, according to the Institutional Theory (Hamdan et al., 2025), "Lack of trust, as a failure to adapt to institutional norms, weakens the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses." All these prioritizations help managers effectively strengthen the legitimacy of their entrepreneurial businesses by focusing on managing mental images, reducing social risks, and increasing public awareness.

Recommendations

Considering the prioritization of 1. Judgmental View, 2. Risk of Social Sanctions, 3. Social Awareness, 4. Economic Stakes, and 5. Lack of Trust, the following practical suggestions are presented to strengthen the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses:

Judgmental View (First Priority): Strengthening judgmental view requires designing an ethical decision-making framework that evaluates the impact of every individual choice on the public mental image. It is suggested that employees, especially managers, participate in simulated workshops to predict social reactions to their decisions (such as changing policies or pricing). Also, creating a reward system for transparent decision-making (e.g., honoring an employee who correctly shares sensitive information with customers) helps transform individual choices into a tool for shaping positive public judgments.

Risk of Social Sanctions (Second Priority): Reducing the risk of social sanctions requires empowering individuals as "risk sensors" in the organization. Launching an anonymous reporting application for employees to register potentially high-risk

decisions (such as marketing plans that might undermine culture) and requiring operational teams to conduct a rapid social impact assessment before executing any new decision (e.g., the impact of layoffs on the local community) turns individual decision-makers into the first line of defense against social crises.

Social Awareness (Third Priority): Increasing social awareness is realized by using individual interactions of employees as the main channels of transparency. Training standard dialogue protocols for employees to explain the complexities of entrepreneurial businesses to customers (e.g., reasons for price increases) and creating an "Ambassadors of Awareness" program (where volunteer employees publish accurate information on social networks and public gatherings) transform every individual into a transparent medium for reducing misunderstandings and strengthening legitimacy.

Economic Stakes (Fourth Priority): Linking individual economic decisions to the fair distribution of benefits is the main priority of this section. Requiring financial managers to report social impact alongside financial reports (e.g., the impact of cost reduction on local employment) and creating a "Responsible Decisions Fund" (where a portion of every project's budget is allocated to social initiatives, such as 1% of the revenue from new pricing decisions) align individual profitability with collective interests.

Lack of trust (Fifth Priority): Compensating for Lack of trust requires designing an individualized accountability system. Creating an "Accountable Decision-Maker" protocol (where every manager personally responds to complaints related to their decision-making area (e.g., the production manager responding to environmental complaints) and launching an "Individual Commitments" platform (where employees publicly announce their transparency-oriented commitments, (e.g., "I prevent corruption in my decisions")) transform decision-makers into symbols of trust-building.

Limitations

1. **Geographical Limitation:** The focus on industries in Kermanshah limits generalizability to other regions of Iran.
2. **Sample Limitation:** The absence of women in the sample may have led to bias in individual decision-making.

Future Research

1. Investigate the role of cultural variables (such as individualism/collectivism) in decision-making related to the legitimacy of entrepreneurial businesses.
2. Conduct a comparative study between different industries (such as services and manufacturing).

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Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that AI is not used in this study.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical Considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification and plagiarism, and any form of misconduct.

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