

ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКАЯ СОЦИОЛОГИЯ

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Legitimacy for innovation through interacted perception

Bennet Schwoon

The University of Edinburgh,
Old College, South Bridge, Edinburgh, EH8 9YL, Scotland, UK

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The paradox of innovation as the problem to be innovative while also gaining legitimacy is the underlying idea of this paper. How are innovative entrepreneurs and their ideas affected by the need to find the legitimacy of their audience to have customers? Through qualitative interviews, this paper discusses the importance and influence of legitimacy for innovative entrepreneurship. This paper investigates the importance of legitimacy processes for entrepreneurs and points out enhancing, as well as, impeding factors that legitimacy gathering process have on innovations. It finds understanding as the main source affecting legitimacy processes and shows the different strategies for entrepreneurs to gather legitimacy. Furthermore, the work provides insight about the context-specific elements of the legitimacy gathering processes, as well as, an illustration and differentiation of the audience as the second group involved in legitimacy processes. This paper provides a new framework that discusses legitimation processes as an interplay between the entrepreneur and individuals of the audience. This new framework is an attempt to solve the long-lasting debate concerning the locus of control in legitimacy processes between institutional and cultural entrepreneurial scholars, by placing the locus of control in between a circle of influence and a circle of understanding.

Keywords: legitimacy, innovation, entrepreneurship, interaction, strategy.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a newly arising field in the business world and is often described as one of the most important fields in current business research and as a major source of economic development [1]. When it comes to entrepreneurship and innovation, legitimacy becomes a major topic of discussion. Rao et al. (2008) [2] describe the phenomenon that competitors with the same products do not automatically gain the same profits. This phenomenon can be explained by the challenge of gaining legitimacy [3]. This observa-

tion indicates that there is a need for legitimation by new ventures. This need is described by pointing out the importance of legitimacy for a new venture to access inputs [2], to access capital, market and governmental protection [4], to increase the chances of survival [3] and to gain greater profits from product introduction [2]. Legitimacy is not gained easily but comes with some critical points. While in the past, business researchers like Barney, Reed and DePhillipp described uniqueness as a sustainable competitive advantage [4], scholars nowadays argue that the asset of uniqueness can become a liability in terms of gaining legitimacy [5]. Additionally, Kuratko et al. (2017) found that newness can be both an asset and a liability for new ventures. It can be a liability in the sense that newness can be associated with a poor understanding and the idea of the unknown. As another critical point, the scepticism of the audience [2] and less credibility and trustworthiness from audiences can make it difficult for new ventures to find legitimacy [3]. These difficulties are referred to as the paradoxical challenge of creating a new venture. The paradox describes the difficulty of a new venture to be both at the same time: similar and different from other organizations [1; 6; 7]. Due to the paradoxical nature of new ventures legitimacy gaining processes it is a growing trend to investigate this topic among scholars [3]. This argument is backed-up by Suchman (1995) [8], who calls legitimacy an anchor-point in the analyzation of organizational actors.

The importance of further research investigations in this field is expressed by Überbacher (2014) [9], Rao et al. (2008) and Navis and Glynn (2010) [10]. While Überbacher (2014) describes the field as fragmented, Navis and Glynn (2010) put an emphasis on the fact that even though a lot of theorizing has been done in the field, there is a gap in empirical research. As a third argument, Rao et al. (2008) point to the one-dimensional research that has been done in the field of legitimacy research so far.

Scholars in legitimacy research refer to four main areas that need further research investigations. Firstly, they call for a more integrative perspective on the theory level so that it is able to build bridges between different theoretical streams [8; 9], as well as an integrative perspective in terms of the locus of control in legitimation processes [8] and a more integrative perspective on the level of views directing from either/or to both/and approaches [8]. Secondly, Suchman (1995) calls for research across social locations. Thirdly, as mentioned before, more empirical research is needed to prove or disprove the theorizing [1] and lastly, scholars need to investigate into the differentiation of audiences that so far have often been treated as equal in their legitimation judgement processes [11].

Based on the further research suggestions by former scholars this article provides an empirical analysis of legitimation gaining processes. It is supposed to help close the gap of empirical research in the field, to investigate into legitimation processes in different social environments, to provide an integrative approach on legitimation processes of new ventures on the theory and the view level and to present some strategic tools of entrepreneurs while facing the problem of gaining legitimacy.

The following questions are asked:

1. Can one find differences in the evaluation of legitimacy processes of Russian and German founders?
2. What strategies do entrepreneurs use to gain legitimacy?
3. Which group is the locus of control in legitimation processes?

The article is structured into four main parts. A first part will provide a review on scientific literature in the field and contains firstly a definition indicating the complexity of the construct, will secondly illustrate shared and divergent assumptions of legitimacy theories and will thirdly present main theories that influence the study. In the second part, the methodology and the methods of the study will be discussed before the results are presented in a third part. In the fourth part the results will be discussed and summarized before limitations and prospects for further research will be stated.

Definitions and Literature Review

Legitimacy is a very complex construct and went through a huge number of changes in its meaning. The historical development of the construct began with Kant who firstly differentiated between external lawfulness and ethnical inner motivation [12]. With this, the basis was given for a differentiation between legality and legitimacy that enabled researchers to discuss the socio-political and later on the socio-economical interpretations of legitimacy [12]. The complexity [13] of the construct is not only illustrated by its multifaceted character and its context sensitivity but also by the number of definitions of legitimacy [8]. Evaluating the numerous definitions, Bitekine (2011) found that definitions of the term legitimacy can be organized into three main categories. The first defines legitimacy mainly as a process of judgement of different behaviours. A second category mainly lays emphasis on the perceptions that underlie any legitimation process while a third category focuses explicitly on the behavioural consequences that legitimation processes have as a result [13]. Taking all three categories into account, namely judgement, perception, and behavioural consequences one can truly understand that legitimation is a process in which individuals try to make sense out of indicating factors based on different perceptions. The sense-making process involved in legitimacy processes can be understood as a judgement based on perceptions that have as a behavioural consequence in an economic sense the acceptance or non-acceptance of a product/company.

Looking at shared and divergent assumptions in theories concerning the field of legitimation Überbacher (2014) defined three main shared and three main divergent assumptions within the existing theories. According to him, it is taken for granted by all theories that new venture legitimacy judgements are the same along all audiences, that they focus mainly on acquiring legitimacy and that legitimation has beneficial consequences for a new venture. He identifies a difference between cognitive and evaluative views on legitimacy and locates differences between where they see the locus of control, whether they have a macro or micro views on the ways to gather legitimacy.

The question about the locus of control goes back on long-lasting investigations about the question of how different societal levels affect each other.

While the effects of individual traits like a need for achievement or risk-taking propensity on a new venture's success are described as weak effects in studies until the 1990's [14] the connections between organisational-level, industry-level, and institutional-level are highly debated by sociologists, political-theorists, and organisation researchers.

The different positions taken to this debate can be understood as different lenses to view a problem [15].

The interaction between organisational-level and social structures was firstly addressed by Stinchombe (1965) [16]. He observed effects between the societal structure

and the foundation of organisations and that these effects are mutual so that organisations play an important role for a societal structure and in particular the feeling of solidarity, while societal structures influence the foundations of organisations. Aldrich and Auster (1986) [17] refer to this phenomenon as a connection/metamorphosis between the organizational and evolutionary level. A further investigation into the interaction between organisations and institutions can be seen by Powell and DiMaggio (1991) [18] discussing the question about how institutions appear and how they interact with societal actors.

Hannan and Freeman (1986) [19] are going one step further by comparing the intensity of influences of industry-level and institutional-level on the organisational level and vice-versa. They address this question by comparing the ability to explain the appearance of diversity among organisations.

In line with ecology theorist's arguments, Aldrich and Staber (1988) [20] state that looking at the example of trade associations one can see that state regulations have seemingly no impact on the organisational level while increasing competition seems to be able to explain changes on the organisational-level and vice-versa. Aldrich and Whetten's (1981) [21] observation of an influential level between institutional-level and organisational level, referred to as the influence of network concepts, can be understood as the underpinning of this observation.

These different interactions between societal actors are important for legitimacy processes as they are described as highly dependent on the interaction between different societal actors. Due to the high importance for new ventures to gain legitimacy, a huge body of research has developed, discussing a lot of different influences on legitimation processes. All attempts have in common that they are structured based on assumptions made about interactions of different societal actors.

The first attempt to structure the literature was made by Suchmann (1995) who differentiated the literature solely with regard to the locus of control into a strategic and institutional approach. He defines strategic legitimacy studies as those studies that see the locus of control in terms of legitimacy in the hands of the entrepreneurs using it as an operational resource. He defines institutional legitimacy studies as those studies that define it as a set of constitutive beliefs.

Überbacher (2014) analysed more than 60 articles about legitimation and structures them like Suchman (1995) did on the basis of the underlying theoretical perspectives. In contrast to Suchman, he defined five categories. As a first category, he defined the institutional perspective as a perspective that investigates into how audiences are influenced by institutions in their legitimacy judgment process [8]. In this category, the latest study of Fisher et al. (2017)[11] can be classified which tries to challenge one of the shared assumptions above by arguing that different audiences follow different institutional logics and cannot be treated as one big audience but have to be understood as single independent audiences. Fisher et al. (2017) conclude that the main task of entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy is to find out different strategies to address different audiences. A second important study within this field is from Bitekine (2011) who investigates mainly into the schemes that audiences use to make their judgements. He differentiates between cognitive institutions and evaluative institutions that play a key role. The important role of evaluative institutions is backed up by Rao et al. (2008) who found out about the importance of working with well-known institutions for new ventures to gain legitimacy. This point is underpinned by Aldrich and Auster (1986) who

discuss the importance of partnerships for small firms with other organisations to gain access to resources.

A second category that Überbacher (2014) defined is the cultural entrepreneurship perspective which indicates that entrepreneurs are skilful cultural operators that use strategic tools for their strategizing. Within this category special emphasis is given to stories that are seen as a possibility for simplification and identity building that help to explain and rationalize entrepreneurial activities and help to make new ventures more understandable, acceptable and by this increase their legitimacy [5]. Stories are furthermore seen as an opportunity to build an identity [5] that helps new ventures to show who they are and what they stand for [10]. An identity helps new ventures furthermore specify their core practices which are often rarely understood [22]. As another important way to gain legitimacy, scholars have identified vocabulary and communication strategies. Aldrich and Fiol (1994) speak about the importance of symbols in communication and specific rhetorical techniques used by new ventures to make themselves understandable and therefore legitimate. Understandably through the right choice of vocabulary [22] and the usage of well-known terms to create familiarity [23] are further outcomes of investigations into the importance of rhetoric elements in legitimation research. A matter of special importance is the knowledge and understanding of the new venture and of the products they offer [4][6]. As a last point from the cultural entrepreneurship perspective, Werven et al. (2015) point out the importance of argumentation styles for gaining legitimacy.

A third category identified by Überbacher (2014) is the ecological perspective, which explains legitimation strategies from new ventures by the density of a market. A low-density will predict dominant legitimation processes while a high-density will predict dominant competition processes [8].

In contrast to the ecological perspective the impression management perspective, tries to explain legitimation processes through a regulation of information from new venture side to construct a favourable and legitimate image.

The last category identified is the social movement perspective, which sees social movements as the main source of legitimated innovative processes.

Apart from Überbacher's categorization, one can also find the elements identity and communication aspects based on Überbacher's category cultural entrepreneurship perspective in the work of Fisher et al. (2017) and Ricard's (2017) work. Besides these two important factors for legitimation, they further identify associative mechanisms [11], organizational mechanisms [11], product and service quality [3] and acknowledgement [1] as important factors to legitimize a new venture.

As a last interesting factor for determining new ventures legitimacy processes, Kuratko et al. (2017), found that the newness of a product is perceived differently by different actors. Depending on the newness of a product for each of the audiences entrepreneurs have to develop own strategies to find legitimacy. Opportunities include special pitches, videos, documents, meeting discussions, etc. [1]. On going communication can be understood as learning opportunities for all network members [3].

As one can see from the literature overview, most of the assumptions and research gaps mentioned exist and Washbury and Bromiley (2014) [24] are not wrong when criticising those boundary decisions are often understood as being made in isolation. They argue for a new two-way understanding and a continuing process of interaction. Processes like legitimation processes along boundaries can only be poorly understood when not

seen in an interaction [24]. Understanding one-sided boundary decisions can be helpful but ignore the interplay of different boundary-settings [23]. Furthermore, it neglects the importance of research that investigated the mutual influence of different societal actors. According to Aldrich and Auster (1986) both, strategy and ecological perspective would benefit from investigations, which consider the two levels of analysis.

The second obvious gap is the gap of empirical research when it comes to strategy formulations to gain legitimacy because even though strategies are identified as: conformity, manipulation, repairing and creation none of these strategies come from empirical research [3].

Methodology and Methods

The study presented in the following section is based on a qualitative explorative approach. A qualitative method was used to get a well-grounded basis for new directions in a field that was like demonstrated above a field of theorizing but never a field of empirical study. To gather the data presented below, a structured qualitative interview was constructed covering the topics: legitimation, trust, networks, openness and information. This article covers only the findings from the legitimation part of the questionnaire.

The data were collected in the start-up ecosystem in Munich, Germany and in the start-up ecosystem in St. Petersburg, Russia. All interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and consisted of the same questions at any time. It was always the same interviewer conducting the interviews and all interviews were made from January 2018 to February 2018. For the interviews in Russian, a translator helped to guarantee the quality of the data. Overall 12 interviews were done in Germany and 17 were made in Russia.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed before they were analysed. Afterwards, all data were analysed in a three-step analysis. Single answer evaluation was used to guarantee independence from quantity effects. A separate evaluation of the data from Russian and German founders was made to find out about local specifics and an overall evaluation of all data to evaluate overall trends.

The sample consists of 17 German and 12 Russian founders. In terms of gender, it consists of 12 female and 17 male founders, while all of the founders are between 19 and 40 years old. Furthermore, the founders are from the IT, sports, food, design, travel, music, education, transport, social, and crafts/arts industry. As this seems to be something unusual, it underpins the explorative approach of this paper, which tries to make findings generable across industry borders. The consistency of the sample is the stage the entrepreneurs are currently in. It consists only of start-ups that have at least run their first prototyping round. In terms of their social status, before they founded their business 12 of the founders were employees, two were self employed, and 15 have been students before. The last sample characteristic is the educational background of the interviewed founders. Twenty-one of the founders have a higher-education degree (PhD, Master-, or Bachelor), while 8 of the founders stated their A-levels as their highest educational achievement.

Results

The first question asked in the section legitimacy was the question: What difficulties did you face when introducing your product to the market? This question was asked to get

to know whether finding legitimacy is an important problem for founders or not. What I found out is that entrepreneurs in Russia and Germany face the problem of legitimacy. All given answers can be clustered into three different categories, which are namely: “lack of product understanding”, “difficulties of their stage of development” and “organisational problems”. The category “lack of product understanding” gives a clear indication that legitimacy is considered to be an important issue for entrepreneurs. There is no significant difference found between German and Russian founders’ answers. They are also giving the same reasons for the lack of product understanding by pointing out that potential customers do not understand their product idea or that they face a high educational effort to get understood. Based on these findings I formulate the first hypothetical finding of the study.

H1: Legitimacy and especially the difficulty of getting understanding for a product is one of the key problems founders face in Russia and in Germany.

The second question asked was about the reactions of founders on the problems they face. I wanted to find out about different strategies entrepreneurs use when they lack understanding of their product. Founders raised the following strategies to handle their problem with customers that did not understand their products: 1. speak the people’s language, 2. improve idea presenting, 3. simplify idea presentation, 4. use influencers to minimize fears, 5. simplify visualization and 6. reduce the problem complexity.

In the strategy used to face the problem of a lack of product understanding, one can see a big difference between German and Russian founders. While Russian founders stated to react with solution orientation, look for help or with a turn away, the German founders reacted only with solution orientation, turned away but none of them stated to actively ask for help.

Different strategies and the above-mentioned differences are illustrated in figures 1 and 2.

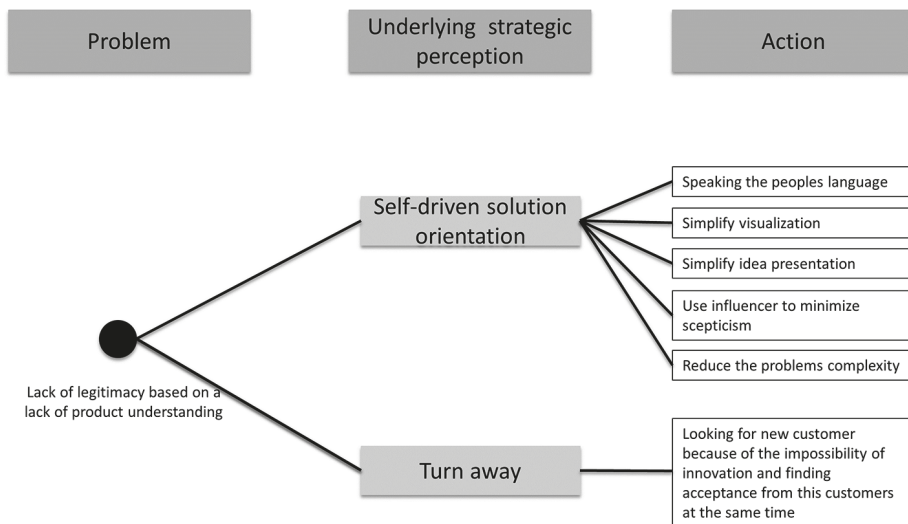


Fig. 1. German founders strategies

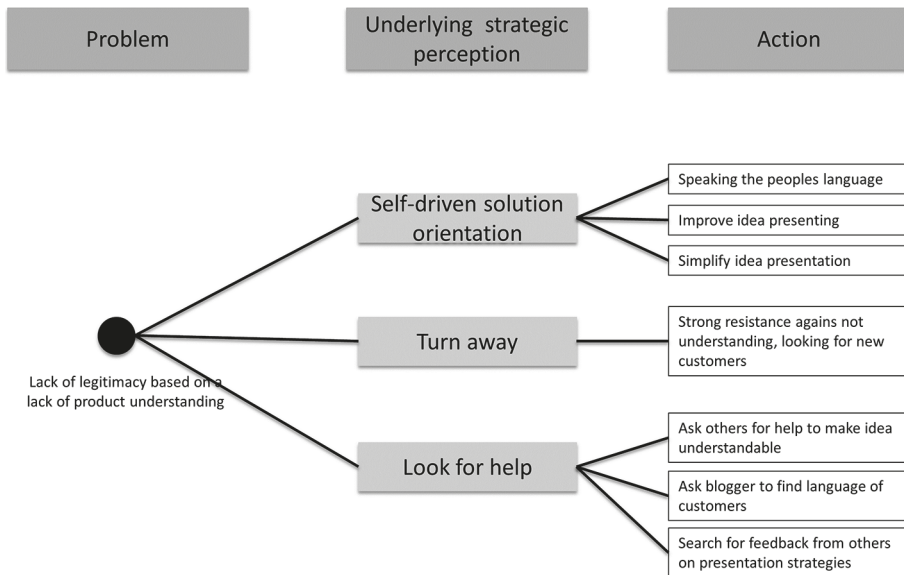


Fig. 2. Russian founders strategies

H2: The manner of handling difficulties concerning the legitimacy and product understanding differs in different social surroundings (Russia and Germany).

The third question that was raised was the question of whether the founders have the impression that they have to leave out a lot of their innovative ideas to find acceptance for their product. The question was asked to find out whether legitimation is a factor that actively hinders innovation. The answers have then been clustered into two categories. These are namely “yes” (I left out a lot of my innovative ideas) or “no” (I did not leave out a lot of my innovative ideas to gather acceptance for my product). In both countries, the founder stated clearly that a lack of acceptance of their products let them to leave out innovative ideas stating that the need to make a living out of their businesses make acceptance greatly important. Founder stated that they actively tried to fit their products into a customer “acceptance scheme”. Based on this Hypotheses 3 is formulated.

H3: Legitimacy problems can reduce the innovation potential of a country.

The fourth question wanted to find out whether problems about product legitimacy made the founders more creative in some situations. This question was raised to answer the question of whether legitimacy problems can be a source of innovation. Founders stated clearly that they made changes in their products based on problems about product legitimacy that they interpreted as an innovation enabler. The changes can be categorized into two main groups: 1. Concrete changes, 2. General changes. As examples of concrete changes founders referred to “improve communication” and “individualising of the product”. As examples for general changes, founders referred to “priority building”, “product improvement” and “increase of creativity”. The arguments among German and Russian founder concerning this question are the same.

H4: Legitimacy problems can enhance the potential of creativity in a country.

The fifth question that was asked was as follows: At what places was it especially easy to find acceptance for your product? The aim of this question was to find out what factors influence legitimation processes positively. The answers could be classified into two main categories: “Special variables” and “the fit”. When founders argued for special variables they stated the “place of living”, “different markets”, “relationship to the founder” and “age” as main influencers. When founders stated, “the fit” they argued about “context”, “previous knowledge”, “understanding” and “participation”. The argumentation among Russian and German founders was the same. Based on these findings I raised the two following hypotheses:

H5.1: Previous knowledge, communication and understanding play a key role in the legitimacy process of a new venture.

H5.2: It is not the institutional logics that differentiate the techniques used by an entrepreneur to gain legitimacy, but it is the fit between the individuals and the entrepreneur’s product.

Based on the findings of question two and five I created a new framework that explains the legitimacy process as an interactive process between individual actors in audiences (independent from institutional logics) and the entrepreneurs’ product presentation strategies, as indicated in figure 3. The underlying assumption for this framework is the finding from question one: Understanding is the main positive influence on legitimation processes. In this framework legitimacy is the result of a “fitting” interplay between the individuals’ capability of understanding and the entrepreneurs’ product presentation, which

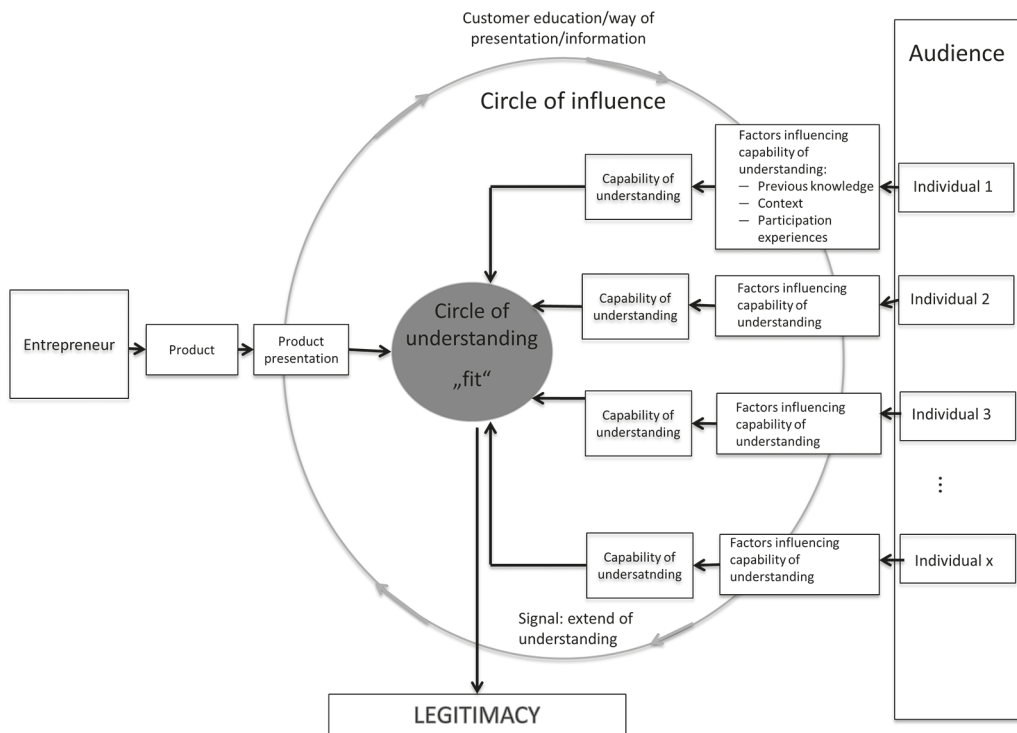


Fig. 3. Legitimacy circle of influence and circle of understanding

in best case react positively in the circle of understanding. To react positively the extend of the capability of understanding has to come together with the right extend of information given through a product presentation that enables the individual to understand the product and the legitimacies of the product at the same time. The circle of influence between the product presentation and the factors influencing the capability of understanding is the main tool of interaction between the entrepreneur and the audience. While the entrepreneur tries to increase the individual's knowledge by information, tries to choose the right moment to provide this information to have the right context, tries to let the individual participate in the product development process and tries to connect the product to former experiences of the individual, the individual signals back to the entrepreneur the extend of understanding that he has gathered so far which offers the entrepreneur the chance to give new information based on these signals. This circle of influence from both sides should then be used to bring together the right extent of capability of product understanding and the right extent of product presentation so that a fit is generated between those two factors that end up in a product understanding within the circle of understanding and results in the legitimacy of the new, innovative product.

Conclusion and Discussion

Comparing the study findings with the literature in the field of legitimacy research one can see that the findings as well as the concluding hypotheses show strong connections with the existing research body on the one side and extend the existing research body on the other side.

The empirical study can prove some of the ideas that previous theories hypothesised. Due to the fact that empirical research is a need in the very theoretical field of legitimacy research these study can be seen as an important contribution to the existing field. Hypotheses one indicating that the lack of understanding plays a key role for entrepreneurs introducing their product to the market in Russia and in Germany is connected to earlier findings in the field and especially the works of van Werven et al. (2015) indicating the importance of understanding and knowledge for the success of new ventures and Rao et al. (2008) explicitly elaborating on the importance of legitimacy nowadays. Following the research suggestion by Überbacher (2014) all constructs have been tested in different social environments, Russia and Germany so that the hypotheses of earlier scholars can be extended by the reach of its validity. Kuratko et al. (2017) and Ricard (2017) both called for empirical evidence of different strategies of how entrepreneurs try to gain legitimacy. Figure one and two are by far no complete scheme of strategies used by entrepreneurs when lacking legitimacy but can definitely be helpful for the use in the practice of entrepreneurs facing the problem of a lack of legitimacy based on a lack of understanding. Hypotheses three and Hypotheses four based on the findings of questions three and four elaborate on something that has so far only been rarely discussed in the literature. While hypotheses three that legitimacy can reduce innovation potentials can be seen in relation to the problem indicated by the innovators' paradox [1; 6; 10] hypotheses four contradicts one of the assumptions that Überbacher (2014) called the shared assumptions of all theories: The consequence that legitimation has beneficial consequences. Hypotheses four indicating that a lack of legitimacy can improve the creativity of founders could be the starting point for a research stream evaluating on the creative and innovative poten-

tial of a lack of legitimacy. The H5.1 and H5.2 can maybe be seen as the most important outcomes of the study. The provided framework, based on the interview analysis and the conclusion of these findings can be seen as a contradiction to the work of Fisher et al. (2017) who tries to differentiate audiences along institutional logics because it shows that it is not a specific institutional logic that decides about the wilfulness of people to accept a product but it is the interplay (the fit) between the product and the audience. This fit is dependent on the previous knowledge influencing the degree of newness like indicated in Kuratko et al. (2017), the educational efforts from the side of founders and their way of communication. With this conclusion, this study understands legitimacy processes as an interplay of entrepreneur and audience and interplay between micro and macro level. By pointing out the importance of mutual effects between different societal actors this study fits the observations of Stinchcombe (1965) and Hannan and Freeman (1968). With this model, the calls of Überbacher (2014), Santos and Eisenhardt (2009) and Washburn and Bromiley (2014) for a model investigating into the interplay of actor and audience focus, combining the institutional perspective and the cultural entrepreneurship perspective are heard and developed.

Directions for future research

The aim of this study has never been to completely and definite close former research gaps, rather it is an exploratory attempt to create new hypotheses that can be the basis for future quantitative research. A qualitative study will never reach this degree of evidence and transparency. But this paper's aim is to build new hypotheses and give new inputs from an empirical angle that a field that enjoyed so much theorizing has lacked so far. From the point of this study, future research could investigate in five major directions.

Firstly, it would be fruitful to build a quantitative model that can bring transparency and practical impacts into the field of legitimacy research. Secondly, one could further elaborate on the question of why entrepreneurs in Russia and Germany reacted so differently on the lack of legitimacy. Is this a country specific phenomenon or are strategies to gain legitimacy different from country to country? Thirdly a whole research stream could investigate the positive contributions of a lack of legitimacy in terms of a rise of creativity and innovation. Fourthly, future research could embed the findings into the broader discussion of interactions between different societal levels.

Lastly, the provided new framework about the interaction and negotiations between the entrepreneurs and the audiences has to be tested on the basis of quantitative methods.

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Author's information:

Bennet Schwoon — MSc.; b.schwoon@gmx.de

Легитимация инноваций через интерактивное восприятие

Беннет Швун

Эдинбургский университет, Старый Колледж,
Великобритания, Шотландия, Эдинбург, Южный Мост, EH8 9YL

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Парадокс инноваций как проблема быть инновационным и получить легитимность является основной проблемой, решению которой посвящено исследование, результаты которого представлены в данной статье. На основе качественного интервью обсуждается важность легитимации инновационного предпринимательства как процесса взаимодействия предпринимателя с заинтересованными сторонами и лицами. Рассматриваются факторы, влияющие на легитимацию инновационной деятельности. Обосновывается тезис о том, что понимание является основным фактором, влияющим на процесс легитимации. Кроме того, исследуются различные стратегии для предпринимателей по приобретению легитимности. В статье представлен новый подход к анализу легитимности инновационного предпринимательства, в рамках которого разрешается противоречие между учеными-институционалистами и учеными культурно-предпринимательского направления в отношении локации контроля в процессах легитимации. Автором обосновано, что контроль располагается между циклом влияния и циклом понимания.

Ключевые слова: легитимность, инновации, предпринимательство, взаимодействие, стратегия.

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Контактная информация:

Беннет Швун — магистр; b.schwoon@gmx.de