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Socio-political legitimacy: An integrative and interdisciplinary review and agenda for theory development in unit and programmatic approaches

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ABSTRACT

Firms operating across national borders are subject to scrutiny in both home and host countries. These multiple regimes of scrutiny increase their vulnerability to legitimacy crises that can significantly impact their operations and reputations. Over the past two decades, scholars in international business (IB) have investigated socio-political legitimacy (SPL), primarily through an institutionalist lens. However, despite extensive research across IB, political science, and sociology, the literature remains fragmented, characterized by diverse theoretical frameworks and modes of inquiry. This paper seeks to synthesize these disparate perspectives and identify converging themes. Specifically, it examines legitimacy through three core dimensions: property, perception, and process. Drawing on 250 studies from IB and management, sociology, and political science journals, this integrative review offers a comprehensive understanding of SPL, highlighting key theories, themes, and methodological trends. Furthermore, it introduces a "theory-on-theory" agenda aimed at advancing legitimacy both as a unit theory and in its relative role within institutional theory as a programmatic theory. The paper lays the foundations for future theorizing and empirical research on legitimacy-building strategies across diverse institutional contexts.

1. Introduction

Socio-political legitimacy (SPL) has been defined as the extent to which "*socio-political stakeholders accept a venture as appropriate and right, given existing norms and laws*" (Aldrich and Fiol (1994, p. 648). Multinational enterprises (MNEs) face significant challenges in securing and sustaining such legitimacy, given that they straddle contexts and hence are subject to multiple regimes of scrutiny (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Zeitz & Zimmerman, 2002). Accordingly, building SPL is crucial for MNEs in both home and host countries (Sun et al., 2023).

Legitimacy has been widely studied in international business (IB), political science, and sociology (c.f. Gifford et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2006; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Lipset, 1959). Despite its importance, there is limited interdisciplinary dialogue and synthesis on the topic. This integrative review aims to consolidate insights from these fields, clarifying the concept of legitimacy and its role in MNEs, while identifying commonalities and distinctions across disciplines, as a basis for advancing theory. Although legitimacy is studied in various contexts—such as regulatory bodies in political science, public perceptions in sociology, and MNEs in IB—there is emerging common ground on the importance of institutions in shaping legitimacy. Yet, whilst IB research often treats legitimacy from an organizational institutional perspective (Schotter et al., 2021; Tost, 2011), there is no consensus on how central legitimacy is to institutional theory. Many IB scholars overlook legitimacy theory, focusing on other aspects of institutions (Brandau et al., 2013; Corciolani et al., 2022; Gifford et al., 2010; Rodgers et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018).

Legitimacy can be seen as a perception, a property, or a process. It exists on a continuum between having and lacking legitimacy, with various definitions depending on theoretical perspectives (Meyer & Caleb, 2025; Suddaby et al., 2017). However, the ambiguity of legitimacy raises questions about whether it can function as a unit theory. In

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turn, the latter represents a framework for describing, understanding, and predicting a particular phenomena (Cronin et al., 2021). Theorizing can concentrate on the unit level, or seek to integrate multiple unit theories for into a framework for broader understanding (programmatic theory) (Wagner & Berger, 1985). In turn, this may advance theory development, reducing the possibility for fragmentation in knowledge production (Cronin et al., 2021). Accordingly, this review highlights the possibilities for locating legitimacy, and, more specifically SPL, as a unit theory within broader programmatic frameworks, with a particular attention to institutional theory.

More specifically, this integrative review aims to: a) consolidate knowledge on how legitimacy has been conceptualized in IB and other disciplines such as political science and sociology; b) identify how IB research can leverage legitimacy as a unit theory to deepen the knowledge base; and c) explore the relevance of institutional theory as an example of programmatic theorizing into which SPL can be integrated, both as a mechanism for more cohesive theory building and as an illustrative example to foster theorizing in other areas of IB. It focuses on how empirical investigation contributes to the accumulation of unit theoretical knowledge within a broader programmatic theoretical framework, emphasizing the understanding of SPL and its alignment with overarching theories (Cronin et al., 2021). This allows for a better understanding of the role of legitimacy within institutions, as well as when and why certain types of legitimating behavior may undermine or even destroy them (Gilley, 2006; Hurd, 2019; Suchman, 1995), the latter arising when institutions are no longer seen as serving powerful actors, and when influential actors believe that the benefits of defection outweigh the risks (Hurd, 2019; Krasner, 1984; Zürn, 2018).

This review article adopts an integrative review methodology, examining studies published since the seminal 1999 article on legitimacy in IB (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999), while also considering political science and sociology fields. Overall, we contribute to theory development by highlighting that legitimacy-building strategies should be viewed through the dual lens of firm-level legitimacy (unit theory) and broader institutional theory (programmatic theory). Such an approach opens important avenues for research, particularly in how firms can both contest and maintain legitimacy within diverse institutional environments.

2. Three strands of legitimacy

A firm's legitimacy may defined in the terms of generalized perceptions that its actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). As noted by Suddaby et al. (2017), there are three main strands of legitimacy: *property, process and perception*. Studies that consider legitimacy as a property focus primarily on legitimacy as a resource or asset that organizations either have or lack. Researchers adopting the legitimacy-as-process viewpoint take a different approach, examining legitimacy as the result of interactions among several actors, usually organizations—who operate mostly, though not exclusively—at higher, macro-levels of analysis, like the organizational field. In contrast, the legitimacy-as-perception stream views legitimacy as a cross-level process involving perceptions, judgements of appropriateness, and actions that take place in interactions between individuals and collectives, cutting across traditional levels of analysis. Furthermore, legitimacy encompasses several typologies, including technical, personal, managerial, cognitive, social, political, and socio-political forms (Bitektine, 2011). Since the seminal work on legitimacy by Kostova and Zaheer (1999), IB research has primarily focused on the social, political, and socio-political aspects of legitimacy building. Socio-political legitimacy is a combination of social and political legitimacy and is fundamentally based on both regulatory elements (i.e., rules and laws) and societal norms (Bitektine, 2011).

3. Integrative review process and scope

Considering our objectives and the scope of inquiry, we leverage an integrative review methodology. Beyond identifying gaps in the literature, integrative reviews are well-suited for synthesizing insights from diverse perspectives and guiding the development and untested or emerging theories (Cronin & George, 2023). This method is particularly effective in uncovering redundancies across different theoretical frameworks and communities of practice. It is most appropriate when the goal is to generate new perspectives by combining insights from existing research (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Post et al., 2020). Accordingly, our review seeks to integrate legitimacy as a unit theory with related programmatic theories, such as institutional theory, in order to advance the field. While unit theory emphasizes legitimacy as a firm-level resource/strategy/being perceived by the stakeholders, programmatic theory situates legitimacy within a broader institutional context. The literature shows a divide in how legitimacy is approached: from the micro-level of individual firm strategies (unit theory) to the macro-level of institutional norms and regulations (programmatic theory). However, these theories are not mutually exclusive. By integrating them, we can better understand how legitimacy is both a resource that firms must acquire and maintain, and a socially constructed phenomenon that evolves through interactions with various institutional actors.

Integrative reviews play a critical role in sense-making and sense-giving (Huff, 2009). For example, they enable the synthesis of research conducted from sociological versus political perspectives. Given the various strands of legitimacy—social, political, and socio--political—this approach is particularly valuable for integrating knowledge across disciplines.

Unlike meta-analyses or systematic reviews, which typically aim to resolve specific empirical questions, integrative reviews are intended to redirect scholarly attention and build bridges across multiple communities of practice (Cronin & George, 2023). Our goal is to reorient legitimacy theory building by incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives, thereby laying the groundwork for the development and testing of SPL frameworks.

3.1. Articles selection and exclusion

Although we acknowledge the potential value of non-refereed publications, our review focuses exclusively on peer-reviewed articles published in reputable journals. This decision reflects the rigorous standards and review processes followed by top-ranked journals. Accordingly, we excluded book chapters, conference papers, editorials, and other non-refereed publications. Our review scope is limited to studies focused on IB, drawn from both IB-specific and management journals. Consistent with Lu et al. (2022), the scope of our integrative review includes 16 journals ranked 3, 4, and 4* according to the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) journal ranking list, 2021 edition. This list was selected based on a meta-ranking of journal quality and relevance to IB research. The review covers the period from 1999 to 2023 period, with 1999 chosen as the starting point due to the publication of a seminal work by Kostova and Zaheer (1999), which has since garnered over 4000 citations. In addition to IB and management journals, we included five elite CABS 4* journals from the 2024 edition,[1] drawn from adjacent fields—specifically, political science and sociology—to capture interdisciplinary insights into how legitimacy is conceptualized across disciplines. Our focus on studies that span disciplines and analyze how these perspectives inform our understanding of SPL. The reviewed literature includes both qualitative and quantitative

[1] Based on the reviewers' valuable suggestion, we expanded the scope to include journals from adjacent fields. For this purpose, we used the latest edition of the CABS ranking (2024), while the initial selection of IB and management journals was based on the 2021 edition.

studies.

We define SPL as the extent to which social and *political stakeholders accept an organization and its actions as appropriate and corresponding to the societal norms and laws* (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 648). Given the wide-ranging dimensions of social, political, and socio-political issues, we adopted an inclusive search strategy. All articles containing the keyword "*legitim*" were identified across the 16 selected journals, ensuring a comprehensive and structured selection process (Hiebl, 2023). To validate the keyword strategy, we consulted with academics experienced in socio-political research within the IB. We conducted our keyword search directly in the topic search fields on the websites of the journals (Niesten & Jolink, 2020). This search yielded 2348 articles in IB and Management Journals. We then screened each article to exclude those that merely mentioned socio-politics or legitimacy without making them a central focus. The final sample included 150 articles that explicitly addressed socio-political legitimacy within the IB context. Table 1 outlines our inclusion and exclusion criteria, along with an exemplar.

Applying the same approach to five leading political science and sociology journals (using a non-time bound search), we identified 499 articles. After screening for relevance, 100 articles were included in the final interdisciplinary sample.

3.2. Articles coding and analysis

One of the authors coded the descriptive information into an Excel spreadsheet, including theoretical framing, methodological details, and contextual orientations, the types of legitimacy addressed, and key themes within the IB literature.

In step 1, we initially coded 15 % of the sample articles, grouping them into five major thematic domains: (1) non-market strategy: political; (2) non-market strategy: social; (3) non-market strategy: socio-political; (4) liability of foreignness, emerging-ness, and newness; and (5) institutional challenges.

In step 2, we expanded the coding to include the theories applied, data sources, the contextual focus of the study (e.g., general MNEs, merger and acquisitions, new ventures, or subsidiary legitimacy).

In step 3, to ensure reliability, the remaining authors independently reviewed and refined the initial coded data. One author then applied the agreed refinements to code the remaining articles. To support the validity of our classification scheme, two expert scholars were invited to review a small sample of studies. Their categorization was consistent and aligned with our classification scheme. The coding sample of ten articles is provided in the Table 1 of the Appendix 1, and this sample was also shared with three external academics for additional review.

We also developed a SPL judgement process, based on the perceived dimensions, underlying conditions, and observed outcomes. To develop a consolidated socio-political legitimacy judgement process—based on perceived dimensions and outcome categorizations—we followed the approach similar to that used in a recent review (Lu et al., 2022).

The analysis, summarized in Table 2, shows that the majority of relevant articles were published in the *Journal of World Business, International Business Review, and Journal of International Business Studies*. Among the 150 reviewed articles, 48 focused on social, 19 on political, and 83 on socio-political legitimacy.

From the political science and sociology journals, the highest number of relevant articles appeared in the *American Journal of Political Science* (political legitimacy) and *Annual Review of Sociology* (social legitimacy). In total, 100 relevant articles from these fields were included (as shown in Table 2). Two authors extracted and analyzed the definitions of legitimacy from these articles. Each definition was independently categorized based on its conceptual dimension—**property, process**, or **perception**—and its scope (e.g., court legitimacy, political system legitimacy, criminal governance legitimacy, ruler legitimacy, democratic legitimacy etc.). These categorizations were subsequently reviewed and verified by remaining authors to ensure objectivity and accuracy.

4. Interdisciplinary conceptualization of legitimacy: (un) common grounds

Table 2 in Appendix-I and Table 3 presents the interdisciplinary conceptualization of legitimacy across the field of IB, political science, and sociology.

First, across disciplines, legitimacy is considered central to institutional functioning. Actors either conform to embedded patterns of behavior—"the rules of the game"— to gain legitimacy or engage in institutional entrepreneurship to alter those rules so their actions become legitimate and eventually institutionalized (Chung & Luo, 2013). However, institutions are not static; they may experience crises due to internal (endogenous) or external (exogenous) pressures, leading to a breakdown in their effectiveness for key actors (Reus-Smit, 2007). In some cases, actors secure legitimacy by challenging institutions—sometimes to reform them, and in other times, to undermine or replace them altogether (Stryker, 1994) , according to how well they

Table 1
Inclusion, exclusion and quality assessment criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Time frame: peer reviewed journal articles published between 1999 and 2023 (the seminal article on Legitimacy in IB setting was published in 1999).	Pre-1999 (contributions to IB began after 1999).
Focus: socio-political legitimacy in the IB field	Given there are different strands of legitimacy such as media legitimacy, internal legitimacy with the organization insiders, social, political, socio-political, technical, personal, structural, procedural, pragmatic, managerial, etc. as outlined in the Bitektine (2011) work. Given our review confined with the social, political, and socio-political legitimacy, hence our sample studies are limited to these aspects only. In other words, we exclude the articles falling outside the IB scope or social, political and socio-political legitimacy scope.
Article type: both theoretical (as it provides theoretical assumptions to be used in the paper and internal and external validity) and empirical papers	Articles merely mentions legitimacy or socio-politics. Books, book chapters, conference papers, and non-refereed publications. We also excluded the other types of legitimacy such as managerial or personal legitimacy etc.
Any sectors Any countries Quantitative and qualitative empirical studies	
An example of included study: Sidki Darendeli, I., & Hill, T. L. (2016). Uncovering the complex relationships between political risk and MNE firm legitimacy: Insights from Libya. *Journal of International Business Studies, 47*, 68–92.	An example of excluded study: Gong, Y. (2006). The impact of subsidiary top management team national diversity on subsidiary performance: Knowledge and legitimacy perspectives. *Management International Review, 46*, 771–790.
Reason for inclusion: The article discusses the political and social strategies for legitimacy building in IB context. In doing so it discusses the legitimacy literature and theory for arguments. Furthermore, the study presents clear findings on the topic e.g., *one of the findings is that social-sector-based path to firm legitimacy in the host country at times substitute for, the government-based path to foreign firm legitimacy* – covering the social and political non-market strategies in gaining legitimacy.	Reason for exclusion: Although the study is in IB and legitimacy, it is based on the *internal* (knowledge based) legitimacy that enhance subsidiary performance. Also, there was no explicit reference to social, political or the socio-political aspects of legitimacy building.

Table 2
Extracted articles per journals.

Journals	CABS 2021	Search	Relevant
Journal of World Business (JWB)	4	374	24
Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)	4*	425	21
International Business Review (IBR)	3	353	24
Journal of International Management (JIM)	3	183	11
Management International Review (MIR)	3	176	10
Global Strategy Journal (GSJ)	4	117	7
Journal of Management Studies (JMS)	4	89	8
Strategic Management Journal (SMJ)	4*	226	8
Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)	4*	47	8
Academy of Management Review (AMR)	4*	124	12
Journal of Management (JOM)	4*	41	1
Academy of Management Perspective (AMP)	4	87	5
Academy of Management Discoveries (AMD)	3	31	2
Management Science (MS)	4*	6	1
Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ)	4*	22	1
Organization Science (OS)	4*	47	7
TOTAL	**CABS 2024**	**2348**	**150**
American political science review (APSR)	4*	150	21
American journal of political science (AJPS)	4*	187	26
American sociological review (AMSR)	4*	24	25
American journal of sociology (AMJS)	4*	92	19
Annual review of sociology (ANNRS)	4*	46	9
TOTAL		**499**	**100**

perceive the system works for them. Institutional breakage, rebuilding or substitution has received growing attention in recent literature, building on historical or 'old' institutionalism; such work seeks to identify key turning points (Hall & Thelen, 2009; Kentikelenis & Babb, 2019). Normally such events take place when a specific interest groupings seeks to build increase their dominance over the system (e.g., predatory emerging elites in Yeltsin's Russia), or elites find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position and hence, are forced to embark on far reaching compromises (e.g., such as occurred in much of Europe after World War 2), While much of the IB literature has traditionally under-explored these dynamic, newer strands have started to engage with it, reflecting the growing view that the world has reached important environmental, political and economic turning points (van Tulder et al., 2022). The resurgence of interest in institutional transformation makes this synthesis especially timely.

Interdisciplinary review of the topic implies three dynamics. First, institutions themselves having legitimation crises (as commonly argued in the political science field) (Hahl et al., 2018). Second, international businesses actively seek legitimacy (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Third, when institutions face legitimation crises this can also undermine or redefine the legitimacy of other players (e.g., firms) (Reus-Smit, 2007). We suggest that the third point is a way to bring insights from political science into closer conversation with research on firms. Accordingly, it calls for more dynamic understanding of legitimacy building across institutions i.e., research should not be just about sustaining or reforming institutions, but also about how firms develop legitimacy when institutions may be attacked, undermined, contested, or substituted.

Second, legitimacy is a contested, fluid, and context-dependent concept, that is sensitive to the changing institutional (e.g., political) conditions (Imerman, 2018). According to Imerman (2018), it is often treated as a characteristic of institution implying being consistent overtime. It is conceptualized differently across disciplines—each offering unique dimensions and definitions. In management, Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as "*a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions*". In political science, legitimacy refers to the extent to which a political system is perceived as "coherent wholes, differing more from one another than within themselves on grounds of economic, social, and political performance" (McDonough et al., 1986, p. 739). In sociology, legitimacy is often tied to social acceptance, such as the legitimacy or illegitimacy of childbirth status (Jenkins, 1958). Again, legitimacy may be tied to adherence to societally specific morals or broader ethical principles (Erman & Möller, 2015).

Third, ambiguity surrounding legitimacy arises from its interdisciplinary nature. In IB/Management literature, "political legitimacy" term is utilized in implying legitimacy of the firm in the eyes of the government and state (Stevens et al., 2016), whereby in political science field the term "political legitimacy" is commonly utilised as the legitimacy of the government or political system in the eyes of other stakeholders (Mikulaschek et al., 2020).

Each field applies different ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. For example, in political science, legitimacy relates to the recognition and acceptance of political authority and government, often assumed by public or other states (e.g., international acknowledgement) (Landis, 2018; Li & Hicks, 2016; Stevens et al., 2016). Ontologically, political science assumes that institutions such as the state or government are real and bounded entities (Lipset, 1959; Piccolo, 2024). Epistemologically, it often relies on positivist approaches, assuming legitimacy can be objectively measured through elections or public opinion polls (Bischof & Wagner, 2019). Methodologically, experimental studies (Bartels & Johnston, 2013; De Bruin et al., 2024; Dickson et al., 2015; Gibson, 2008; Kao et al., 2024) and panel based surveys (Bartels & Kramon, 2022; Bischof & Wagner, 2019) are commonly used.

Sociology views legitimacy as the acceptance of social institutions or of norms, emphasizing normative behavior and social order. Ontologically, it assumes that social norms and institutions are constructed realities shaped by collective behavior (Bandelj, 2009; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). Epistemologically, sociology often embraces interpretivist approaches, seeking to understand the meanings individuals attach to legitimacy Cattani et al. (2014). For example, studying how communities perceive the legitimacy of the police in serving the marginalized communities (Rios et al., 2020). Methodologically, the studies employ ethnographic approaches (Bechky, 2003; Levine, 2016; Rios et al., 2020), interviews (Rao et al., 2003; Santos, 2022) along with document analysis (Lichtenstein, 2022; Santos, 2022) and audit reports (Santos, 2022). Experimental studies are also common (e.g., Jenkins, 1958).

In IB and management, legitimacy pertains to stakeholder acceptance of an organization's practices and actions, with a focus organizational survival (Levine, 2016) and performance (Bai et al., 2019). Ontologically, it views firms as socially embedded actors whose survival depends on environmental fit and stakeholder perceptions (Kostova &

Table 3
Legitimacy conceptualization across represented disciplines.

Discipline	Property (Status or Structural Condition)	Process (Mechanisms of Construction)	Perception (Evaluation by Stakeholders)
Political Science	Legitimacy as a right to rule, embedded in institutions (e.g., democracy, courts, regimes)	Political representation, elite legitimation, institutional design, policy action	Citizens' perception of state, courts, democracy, inclusion, fairness
Sociology/ Organizational Theory	Institutionalized roles, legitimacy as taken-for-granted status	Normative alignment, framing, mimicry, social validation through networks	Social approval, moral evaluation, conformity to cultural expectations
International Business	Recognition by host institutions, alignment with legal/formal frameworks	Strategic adaptation to institutional environments, stakeholder management	Public trust, corporate reputation, perceived legitimacy by foreign audiences

Zaheer, 1999; Zeitz & Zimmerman, 2002). Epistemologically, both positivist and interpretive paradigms are common. Methodologically, panel data, interviews and surveys are widely utilized (discussed in detail in Section 5.2). Conceptual studies are also common.

Fourth, despite disciplinary differences, most fields reference three core dimensions of legitimacy: *property* (as an inherent attribute), *perception* (as stakeholder evaluation), and *process* (as something earned or negotiated over time) in social and political strands of legitimacy. However, socio-political legitimacy is relatively a newer concept. Hence, the concept of socio-political legitimacy needs proper introducing (i.e. explaining it straddles thinking around social and political legitimacy, what it means and how it has been applied to the firm (Coşkun & Arslan, 2024; Jones et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024). Next, we turn to a review of the IB literature, highlighting key findings, ongoing tensions, and opportunities for theoretical development.

5. A descriptive overview of socio-political legitimacy in IB

5.1. Number of publications per year and citations

Fig. 1 illustrates that research on SPL within the IB field has steadily gained scholarly attention over time. As of September 2025, the reviewed studies have accumulated a total of 49,275 citations. The top five studies in our sample account for 18,060 citations—approximately 37 % of the total. Collectively, these findings underscore the significant scholarly impact of the topic within the IB literature.

5.2. Methodological orientations and measurement

The articles predominantly employed quantitative methodologies, followed by qualitative approaches, conceptual and proposition-based studies, with only a small number adopting mixed methods. An analysis across the three types of legitimacy reveals a notable scarcity of mixed-method studies.

Conceptual investigations commonly focused on developing theoretical perspectives and formulating propositions. Qualitative research was largely interview-based, while quantitative studies primarily relied on panel data and survey- based methods. The limited number of mixed-methods studies typically integrated surveys with interviews or combined natural experiments with interviews (see Table 4).

In terms of research context, most studies adopted a general perspective focused on MNEs. A smaller number of studies focused on specific contexts such as subsidiaries, and mergers and acquisitions (M&As). Notably, there remains limited research on other forms of internationalizing firms—such as born globals and international new ventures—across all types of legitimacy, highlighting it as an area for future exploration (Knight et al., 2025).

Table 4
Methodological and measurement approaches.

Methods	Measurement Approaches	Social	Political	Socio-Political	Total
Conceptual	Conceptual	10	4	19	33
	Total	**10**	**4**	**19**	**33**
Qualitative	Interviews	7	1	20	28
	Secondary data	3	2	2	7
	Bibliometric	1			1
	Multiple measurement methods				
	Interviews & secondary data	2		1	3
	Interviews, focus groups, observations	1		1	2
	Interviews, focus groups, archival data		1		1
	Total	**14**	**4**	**24**	**42**
Quantitative	Panel data	11	6	22	39
	Survey	6	5	9	20
	Secondary data	5		6	11
	Meta-analysis			1	1
	Scale development	1			1
	Total	**23**	**11**	**38**	**72**
Mixed	Surveys and Interviews	1		1	2
	Natural experiments & Interviews			1	1
	Total	**1**		**2**	**3**
	GRAND TOTAL	**48**	**19**	**83**	**150**

5.3. Contextual orientations

Table 5 highlights that the majority of studies across all legitimacy types adopt an emerging market perspective (n = 66). Other studies primarily controlled for market differences while offering a generalized

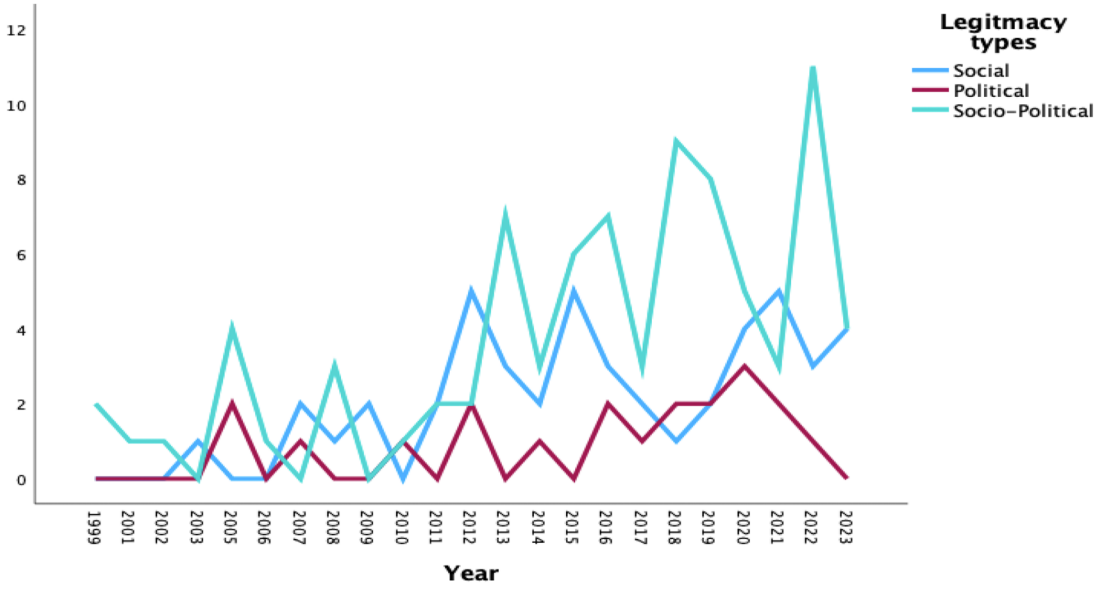

Fig. 1. Number of articles per year.

Table 5
Contextual orientation by markets.

	Social	Political	Socio-Political	Total
Conceptual (N/A)/Generic Perspective	11	4	12	27
Global	9	2	7	18
EMERGING MARKET				
Emerging markets in general			2	2
Multiple emerging markets	3		6	9
China	7		16	23
China & Taiwan			1	1
China, India, South Africa, & Turkey.			1	1
India	1	1	2	4
Africa		1	4	5
Brazil			1	1
Chile			2	2
Peru	1		1	2
Russia	1		1	2
Bangladesh	1		1	2
Asia, Eastern Europe, & Latin America.			1	1
Asia	1		1	2
Single Context (emerging): Vietnam, Burma, Taiwan, Mexico, Ukraine, Libya, Hungary, UAE)	3	2	3	8
ADVANCED MARKET				
USA	2	2	4	8
Multiple advanced markets	2		3	5
Australia		1	1	2
Sweden	1			1
Germany	1			1
Germany, Hongkong & Italy			1	1
Nordic countries			1	1
Single Context (advanced): Italy, Ireland, Netherland)			3	3
ADVANCED AND EMERGING MARKETS				
Multiple emerging and advanced		2	6	8
Europe	1	2		3
China & USA		1		1
China & Germany	1			1
China in politically aligned and misaligned host (emerging and advanced markets)		1		1
Brazil & Germany			1	1
Brazil & Sweden			1	1
Sweden & South Africa	1			1
USA & Canada	1			1
Total	48	19	83	150

view of MNEs without anchoring the analysis in a specific market context ($n = 27$). Additional studies focused on advanced markets ($n = 23$), adopted a global perspective ($n = 18$), or examined a mix of emerging and advanced markets ($n = 16$).

Within the emerging market category, China emerged as the most frequently studied context, particularly in the socio-political and social legitimacy literature ($n = 18$). Notably, research on both social and political legitimacy often relied on conceptual approaches or adopted a generalized MNE perspective. In terms of industry-wise, a majority of studies ($n = 58$) did not specify a particular industry focus across the three legitimacy types. Among those that did, manufacturing ($n = 28$) and services ($n = 25$) sectors were examined. A subset of studies included both manufacturing and service industries ($n = 34$), while a few concentrated-on sectors such as government and non-profit organizations ($n = 5$).

5.4. Theoretical orientations

As shown in Table 6, the organizational institutionalism approach—embedded in sociological perspective—dominates the literature, appearing in 100 of the reviewed articles. Beyond organizational institutionalism, the theoretical landscape is notably fragmented, with considerable heterogeneity and no consistent application of alternative frameworks. Few studies explicitly position legitimacy as a standalone "unit theory," often treating it as a loosely defined or secondary concept. A small number of articles adopt an institutional economics perspective ($n = 9$), while others blend or conflate multiple institutional traditions, such as organizational and comparative institutionalism ($n = 7$). Only one study attempts to integrate these diverse institutionalist streams into a unified theoretical framework ($n = 1$).

6. Notable findings in IB

Given socio-political legitimacy is relatively a newer concept, it requires proper explaining in terms of what it means and how it has been applied to the firm (Coşkun & Arslan, 2024; Jones et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024). This review identifies predominant themes in the socio-political legitimacy literature, which revolve around: *non-market strategies, institutional challenges, and the liabilities of foreignness, emergingness, and newness*. These themes serve as an organizing framework for consolidating the literature. While they offer a useful structure, the field remains fragmented, with limited theoretical integration across these dimensions.

Our analysis reveals that non-market strategies: social (e.g., corporate social responsibility i.e., CSR), political (e.g., political ties), and socio-political (combination of both the social and political aspects of the strategy) are the dominant process-based mechanisms in legitimacy building. Meanwhile, liabilities of foreignness, newness, and emergingness are often examined under the perceived dimensions influencing socio-political legitimacy. However, few studies explore how these liabilities interact with each other or evolve over time. Only a limited number of studies examine legitimacy as a property of the firm in mitigating liabilities. The institutional environment serves as a contextual condition that facilitates or constrains legitimacy-building process, perception formation, and property acquisition, and institutional challenges also impact the legitimacy (see Fig. 2). Yet, the literature often treats institutions as static backdrops, paying less attention to how institutional shifts can redefine legitimacy thresholds. Next, we present the findings on legitimacy research across its' process, perception and property-based conceptualization dimension.

6.1. Legitimacy as a property

Studies treating legitimacy as a property primarily address socio-political legitimacy (SPL). These are largely conceptual (Stevens et al., 2016) or focused on construct development (Berrone et al., 2020). For example, Stevens et al. (2016) proposition-based study, adopting an institutional economics lens, suggests that social legitimacy (as a property) is weakened when government legitimacy is low. Conversely, high social legitimacy can mitigate intervention even in cases of weak political legitimacy (Stevens et al., 2016). However, these propositions remain untested and assume linear relationships that may not hold under conditions of institutional volatility and political polarization, both across and within countries—contexts in which MNE legitimacy can be particularly contested.

Similarly, Zeng and Xu (2020) argue that constitutive legitimacy functions as a property that helps mitigate liability of foreignness. They suggest that legitimacy can be conferred by other foreign firms—both from the same home country or from different origins. Late movers may benefit from prior legitimacy (property) established by earlier entrants. This raises important questions about how legitimacy is transferred or shared across firm boundaries, which remain underexplored. Their insights, while promising, are mostly conceptual and would benefit from empirical testing, especially using longitudinal designs to capture legitimacy's evolution across host-country contexts.

6.2. Legitimacy as a perception

Within this stream, studies conceptualizing legitimacy as a

Table 6
Theoretical perspectives across major themes.

	Non-market: social strategies	Non-market: political strategies	Non-market: political and social strategies	Institutional challenges	Liability of foreignness, emerging-ness, and origin	Total
Legitimacy based view						
Legitimacy-based view		1	1			2
Legitimacy perspective in lobbying		1				1
Sociological (institutional)						
Institutional theory: organizational/ sociological	23	7	35	5	1	71
Institutional theory (sociological); Agency theory			1	1		2
Institutional theory (sociological); Social embeddedness perspective					1	1
Institutional theory (sociological); Social identity theory			1			1
Institutional theory (sociological); Organizational theory			1			1
Institutional theory (sociological); Resource-based view			2			2
Institutional theory (sociological); Agency theory; Stakeholder theory			1			1
Economics (institutional)						
Institutional theory (economic)	1	2	4	1		8
Institutional (economic), agency theory			1			1
Socioeconomics (institutional)						
Institutional theory (socio-economic/ comparative)	4		1			5
Meshed/Synthesis institutional theoretical perspective						
Meshed	1	1	3	2		7
Synthesis	1					1
Sociological (non-institutional)						
Social integration theory	1					1
Social contract theory	1					1
Social learning theory	1					1
National identity perspective	1					1
Economies of Worth framework				1		1
Social movement theory			1			1
Economics (non-institutional)						
Principal agent theory		1				1
Transaction cost theory	1					1
Information economics						
Signaling theory	1					1
Ecology						
Population ecology theory					1	1
Density dependence theory					1	1
Evolutionary theory	1					1
Organizational ecology theory			1			1
Psychology						
Prospect theory			1			1
Theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation			1			1
Social psychology						
Social identity theory	2					2
Social psychology perspective	1					1
Schema congruity theory			1			1
Social control theory; Cognitive balance theory	1					1
Theory of social judgments			1			1
Sociolinguistic						
Sociolinguistic theory	1					1
International relations						
Pluriversal perspective			1			1
Communications						
Rhetorical theory	1		1			2
Mass communication perspective			1			1
Political science						
Theory of political risk				1		1
Business management						
Network perspective	3		2			5
Stakeholder theory	1		1			2
Inductive theory on strategies for managing corruption		1				1
Theory of behaviour of people and firm		1				1
Theory of gendered organisation	1					1
Government creating advantages perspective			1			1

(*continued on next page*)

Table 6 (*continued*)

	Non-market: social strategies	Non-market: political strategies	Non-market: political and social strategies	Institutional challenges	Liability of foreignness, emerging-ness, and origin	Total
Knowledge-based view		1				1
Real options theory			1			1
Dynamic capability theory			1			1
Theory of business ethics	1					1
Integrative-responsiveness framework		1				1
Business management with political science						
Stakeholder theory; Political embeddedness perspective			1			1
Stakeholder theory; Political CSR theory	1					1
Business management with economics						
Organizational learning and capability theory; Transaction cost theory	1					1
Total	51	17	67	11	4	150

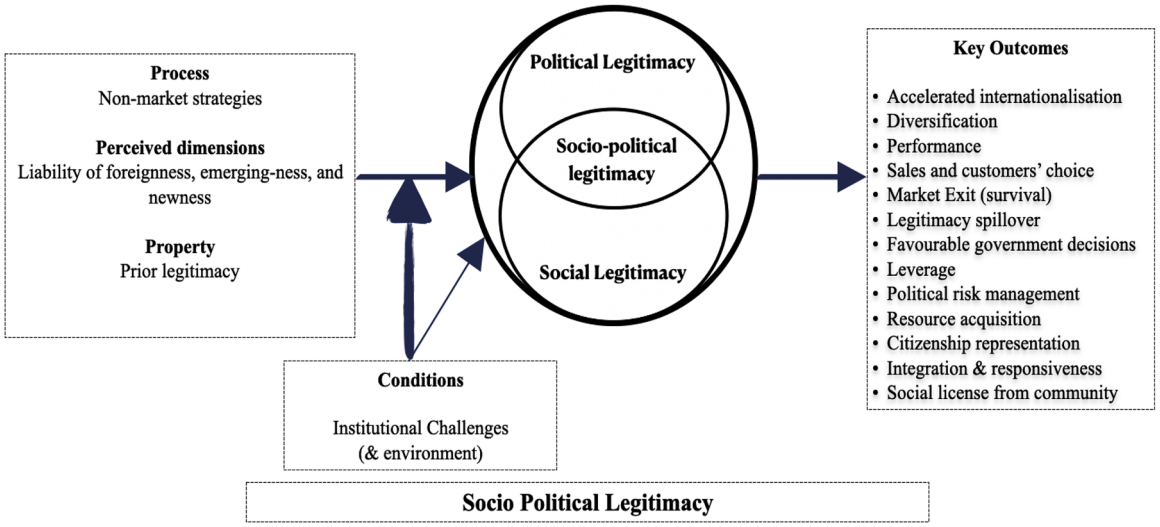

Fig. 2. Legitimacy strands and legitimacy building.

perception are often limited. For example, in the realm of socio-political legitimacy, Chung and Luo (2013) show that under high levels of foreign institutional investment, outsider ownership positively influences firm performance. The study finds that outsider premium increases when firms are embedded in a mature market logic— suggesting that perceived legitimacy enhances resource acquisition capabilities. While the findings are insightful, they primarily reflect investor perceptions in more mature markets, and may not generalize to emerging and transitional economies, where institutional logics and legitimacy cues differ substantially. Future research could examine how different stakeholder groups—governments, investors, communities—form and weigh perceptions of legitimacy, especially under conflicting legitimacy demands.

6.3. *Legitimacy as a process*

Process-based studies largely frame legitimacy-building as reliant on non-market socio-political strategies. Social strategies are widely considered tool in social legitimacy, political strategies in political legitimacy, and a blend of both in socio-political legitimacy. However, findings on the outcomes of non-market strategies are often mixed. For example, while both social and political ties are effective in social and political legitimacy building, however CSR is more effective than political in SPL (Bai et al., 2019). CSR communication is effective in CSR based legitimacy for enhanced performance (Zeng et al., 2013). Yet, little is known about the contingencies that explain when and why these strategies succeed or fail. Hawn (2021) finds that while CSR media coverage does not improve acquisition success in institutionally different markets, negative media coverage (corporate social irresponsibility) reduces acquisition success. This points to an asymmetry in the effect of positive vs. negative perceptions. This also highlights the reputational risks tied to legitimacy strategies, which are often under-theorized. Larger MNEs subsidiaries generally employ political strategies as part of a legitimacy-building process (Hillman & Wan, 2005).

Furthering the emphasis on the efficacy of political ties, on one hand it is asserted that MNEs from nations with stronger political ties to advanced markets, such as the USA, tend to perform better after acquiring other firms (Hasija et al., 2020). On the other hand, Bucheli and Kim (2012) find that while political integration positively contributes to legitimacy, however this relationship is weakened by institutional change. They argue that legitimacy can reduce political risk and facilitate vertical integration. However, they also highlight that alliances between MNEs and political elites may become ineffective in host countries undergoing institutional transformation— posing new challenges for sustaining political legitimacy. These findings suggest that political legitimacy strategies may need to be more adaptive and context sensitive. Thus, future research could examine such strategies by adopting longitudinal and comparative research designs across dynamic political environments.

Engagement with socio-political actors is a key tool in the SPL-building process, with a predominant focus on formal institutions. For instance, network-building with local government actors—through

collaborative or submissive relational ties—has been positively associated with legitimacy, whereas adversarial or collusive ties show negative associations. This suggests that different types of government relationships can produce varied legitimacy outcomes (Earl & Michailova, 2021). Diplomatic connections, whether at the organizational or personal level with local governments, have also been found to enhance legitimacy (Li et al., 2018). Arguably, there is an ambiguity here as engagement with some political actors may reduce legitimacy, or at least reduce legitimacy in some communities/nations, even if it adds to it with the government in question and its adherents. The difficult choices faced by many firms in engaging with the present US government confirms this (WEForum, 2025). Still, this strands of research rarely engages with the ethical or reputational trade-offs that such ties may carry, particularly in politically polarized contexts.

Furthermore, it is notable that SPL process largely overlooked the role of informal institutions or the challenges of balancing the often-incompatible demands of formal and informal institutions that can be explored. This gap limits explanatory power in non-Western or transitional settings where informal institutions dominate.

The findings on socio-political legitimacy have largely overlooked the interactions between social and political legitimacy, however possessing one without the other may not be sustainable under certain institutional environments (An et al., 2024). Limited studies emphasize the complementarity of non-market strategies. For instance, Sidki Darendeli and Hill (2016) using the economic institutionalism approach show that MNEs under political risk conditions benefit aligning with social groups, providing an alternative path to legitimacy outside government channels towards SPL. This reflects a need to study legitimacy strategies not in isolation but in combination, particularly in contested or unstable environments.

Using rhetorical theory, Tian (2022) highlights that MNEs must understand political sentiments and socio-cultural environments as essential for establishing SPL in developing markets as their post-entry strategy. This supports a move toward more embedded, context-sensitive frameworks of legitimacy-building. Accordingly, we propose that future studies should also examine contemporary risks associated with socio-political legitimacy building—such as those arising from geopolitical tensions and the era of the 'cold tech war'—which compel firms to develop innovative strategies to navigate these challenges (Tung et al., 2023). Trumpism - and firms increasingly face choices of bending to Trump and losing legitimacy abroad or opening up risks of operating in the US and retaining legitimacy. Another important consideration is legitimacy can be fluid; firms linked the Chinese government had persistent questions regarding the legitimacy (Zhang et al., 2018), and now this is the case with the US tech giants and their ties to the Trump administration (Independent, 2025). Future research could further investigate how MNEs dynamically recalibrate their socio-political legitimacy strategies in response to such prolonged geopolitical tensions, particularly by examining how socio-political capabilities evolve and are leveraged across institutional contexts (Moura et al., 2025). A promising line of inquiry involves exploring how firms sequence SPL-building activities over time and respond to evolving legitimacy expectations across home and host markets.

Most studies mostly adopt an institutional perspective, viewing institutional conditions as contingency mechanisms that either enhance or mitigate the effects of firms' strategies and process for building SPL in the host environment. Legitimacy-related strategic actions—such as certification—can enhance firm profitability by helping firms overcome the liability of foreignness, especially in transition economies. These effects are stronger under conditions of conformance legitimacy, such as high host-region marketization, strong institutional quality, a dense foreign firm community, prior host-market experience, and larger firm size (Zhang et al., 2019). MNEs operating in emerging markets can combine strategies such as isomorphism, transference, political activism, and rhetoric to gain legitimacy and mitigate the liability of foreignness (Caussat et al., 2019). Research has predominantly employed an organizational institutionalism approach (Assenova & Sorenson, 2017; Bitektine, 2011; Dacin et al., 2007). There is scope to extend institutional theory by incorporating alternative perspective, such as comparative institutionalism. Given the potential for SPL trade-offs between home and host countries, future studies should also account for the largely neglected conditions of home market. Furthermore, the role of democracy—and democratic institutions more broadly—in shaping SPL efforts remain underexplored.

6.4. *Mixed strands of legitimacy*

Mixed strands of legitimacy are largely considered under social and political legitimacy, with most of these concerns aligning with the institutional environment. For example, studies on social legitimacy have also considered the alignment with the institutional environment—particularly cultural norms—within the framework of perception- and process-based legitimacy. Roth et al. (2011) propose that cultural orientation may influence the legitimacy-building process through social networks, with effects varying across different societal cultures. Similarly, Shin et al. (2023) find that a firm's ESG performance plays a key role in shaping legitimacy (perceptions), with these effects being more pronounced in cultures characterized by high individualism or masculinity, and less pronounced in cultures with high power distance or uncertainty avoidance. Young and Makhija (2014) argue that a firm's economic motivations—specifically economic visibility and economic vulnerability—play a role in managing the institutional environment and CSR responsiveness for legitimacy perceptions. Gifford and Kestler (2008) suggest, through their qualitative study, that legitimacy strategies should emphasize social motivations to address community needs and engage with community partners. Taken together, these studies highlight a persistent tension in legitimacy-building: firms must navigate competing economic and social logics, yet there is little clarity on how they balance or prioritize these motivations in practice.

In considering political legitimacy, Banerjee and Venaik (2018) studied Australian subsidiaries in 28 foreign markets and found mimetic isomorphic, financial effects, constituency building, and relational effects. Their study indicates that subsidiary government regulation influences their non-market political activities as part of political legitimacy-building (as a process), with these effects being greater under subsidiary market strategy integration and innovation. These, in turn, improve the subsidiaries' perceived legitimacy but not their performance, and that legitimacy (as a property) leads to favorable government decisions (Banerjee et al., 2019). However, a recurring challenge is the weak or inconsistent link between legitimacy and firm outcomes such as performance—raising questions about the instrumental value of legitimacy across different institutional contexts. There is scope for future research to examine how foreign firms dynamically balance economic and social motivations in legitimacy-building across culturally and politically diverse contexts. Furthermore, future studies could investigate the interplay between perceived legitimacy and actual performance outcomes under diverse regulatory regimes and in increasingly polarized environments.

Jia (2018) proposes a conceptual framework integrating economic effectiveness with perceived legitimacy. When political audiences face significant uncertainty about lobbying content, they rely on the prior credibility of the lobbying entity—highlighting the centrality of perceived legitimacy in shaping political evaluation. Jia (2018) further underscores the process-based dimension of legitimacy by showing that political audience's reliance on rule-based evaluations in acceptance or rejection of firm activity. However, the scope of such work is often limited to regulatory audiences in mature economies.

7. Future research directions

Most studies view legitimacy as firm level concept and definition is usually broad. This section suggests IB research ways to resolve this

tension and further advance the agenda at the interface of legitimacy and institutional theory (see Table 7).

7.1. Theory development

Most of the literature adopts a process-based approach to legitimacy, often setting aside discussions of property and perception dimensions until later in the analysis. However, a few notable exceptions examine the interplay between property, perception, and the process of legitimacy-building (Banerjee et al., 2019; Schnyder & Sallai, 2020). Similarly, only a limited number of studies have focused exclusively on either property- or perception-based legitimacy (Chung & Luo, 2013; Stevens et al., 2016; Zeng & Xu, 2020). These works tend to adopt part of IB literature, focusing on mechanisms such as networking as a non-market strategy, and are often linked the organizational institutionalism.

Despite legitimacy being the central concern, much of the literature relies heavily on organizational (sociological) institutionalism, not as a theory in itself, but rather as a concept fitted into one or more existing programmatic frameworks, for example, institutional theory (Banerjee & Venaik, 2018; Kölbel & Busch, 2021). As a result, legitimacy is frequently used as a label for a set of activities rather than as a unit theory—that is, a theory that is focused to single phenomena, legitimacy in its own right.

To advance theoretical development, scholars should deepen legitimacy as a unit theory, particularly through a process-based lens. This approach would help consolidate legitimacy as a core analytical framework in IB, accounting for factors such as the liability of foreignness, mechanisms like network building and non-market strategies, and outcome distinctions (e.g., whether the process is open-ended or completed). Legitimacy as a unit theory provides explanatory and predictive power for how legitimacy is built, challenged, and sustained across actors, levels, and institutional contexts—distinct from its current use as a contextual backdrop or rhetorical concept. Therefore, positioning legitimacy as a unit theory allows for conceptual bridging across organizational, economic, and comparative institutional perspectives, providing a unified framework to examine how legitimacy-building varies across actors, and levels of analysis. While legitimacy can be theorized independently, it also can be inserted into broader programmatic theories such as institutional theory, thereby deepening theoretical insights. By deepening our understanding of legitimacy as a unit theory, and identifying which programmatic theories it can be integrated into—scholars can better explain and predict how firms navigate distinct legitimacy-building processes across diverse institutional settings.

Table 8 provides definitions and examples illustrating how legitimacy, as a unit theory, can be situated within (programmatic) institutional theory to aid knowledge development. Furthermore, the broader contributions of legitimacy theory in management studies could be enhanced by more explicitly engaging with foundational literature and by acknowledging in its various manifestations—political, social, and socio–political. Significant developments have occurred in the

Table 7
Legitimacy research agenda: future directions to advance the field.

Institutional Lens	Research Questions	Legitimacy Dimension	Methodological Suggestions	Theoretical Compatibility
Organizational Institutionalism	How do MNEs engage with informal social institutions (e.g., NGOs, activists, media) to shape legitimacy perceptions in contested environments, particularly in emerging vs. advanced markets?	Perception	Multiple-case studies, sentiment analysis	Complements judgment and perception views
	How does legitimacy accumulate or decay over time in response to institutional fluidity, considering pre- vs. post-crisis institutional environments?	Process	Longitudinal studies, institutional tracking	Extends legitimacy beyond static outcomes toward dynamic theorization
	How can firms manage competing moral logics when constructing legitimacy claims in cross-sector partnerships across North–South- South collaborations?	Perception	Moral rhetoric analysis, discourse analysis	Reinforces legitimacy as a site of normative struggle
	How does the erosion of public trust (e.g., due to greenwashing or symbolic CSR) lead to legitimacy loss over time, particularly in Global South vs. Global North contexts??	Property	Longitudinal studies, in-depth interviews	Extends performative legitimacy critiques
Comparative Institutionalism	How do firms reconcile conflicting demands from political and social audiences in institutionally hybrid environments, including authoritarian vs. democratic contexts?	Property, perception & process	fsQCA, comparative case studies	Locates legitimacy unit theory within comparative institutional analysis
	How do actors challenge or defend legitimacy across local, national, and transnational institutional levels, considering EU, ASEAN, or multilateral governance arenas?	Property, Perception, & Process	Multiple-case studies, discourse coalition analysis	Bridges scalar dynamics and builds on institutional layering
	How do born globals manage legitimacy demands across multiple institutional contexts simultaneously, with emphasis on born globals/INVs from emerging vs. developed markets??	Property & Process	Cross-national case studies, founder narratives	Broadens legitimacy theorization into international entrepreneurship
	How do formal institutional constraints interact with informal norms to shape legitimacy strategies, particularly in weak institutional environments or transition economies?	Process	Process tracing, institutional analysis	Compatible with institutional duality perspective
	How can firms sequence legitimacy (social first, then political) for enduring socio-political legitimacy, particularly in fragile or unstable states?	Property, Perception, & Process	Longitudinal processual studies, institutional mapping	Complements integrated legitimacy perspectives
Political Institutions-Centred Analysis	How does ideological alignment or misalignment between MNEs and host governments influence legitimacy durability in authoritarian and democratic regimes?	Property & Process	Archival, policy analysis, elite interviews	Situates legitimacy within political institutions frameworks
	How do political ties work differently in coordinated vs liberal market economies for achieving legitimacy? How do social and political legitimacy interact in navigating through comparative institutional settings.	Property	Cross-country survey data	Compatible with varieties of capitalism frameworks
	What is the dark side of political legitimacy (e.g., collusion, lobbying backlashes), and how does it affect socio-political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes?	Property & Process	Critical discourse analysis, elite interviews	Builds on critique of rent-seeking legitimacy strategies
	How do emerging political ideologies (e.g., populism, technocratic governance) redefine legitimacy standards for foreign firms, particularly in hybrid vs. liberal democracies?	Property & Process	Archival studies, discourse analysis, in-depth interviews	Expands legitimacy theory with political ideologies

Table 8
Unit and programmatic theories.

Definitions	Unit theory Definitions	Examples of socio-political legitimacy as a unit theory	Programmatic Definition*	Examples when integrated into a programmatic theory: institutionalism
Sense making for	understanding a phenomenon (e.g., the construction process)	How property, perception, or process of SPL occur?	Fitting into wider body of theorizing (e.g., architectural process).	What collectively the property, perception, or process tell us about the institutions in developing SPL?
Stored in	a testable model – justifying empirical model or a meta-analysis, or new research questions; unit theory will provide both a description and an explanation.	—	Location of specific phenomena within a broader collection of phenomena. Multiple testable models	—
Emerges from	Deepening understanding of a causal relationship (e.g. by defining boundary conditions and/or by deepening understanding of causal mechanisms).	–	Linking of multiple causal relationships	For example, liberal vs coordinated economies are different, and mould SPL building process in different ways.
Modified by	Empirical testing and the identification of additional intervening variables	For example, sectoral variations (as a moderator and boundary condition). The underlying concept i.e. legitimacy describes and explains a phenomenon, and it can be manifested in different ways - e.g., political, social and socio-political that can present deeper explanatory and predictive powers to legitimacy as a concept.	Assimilation and accommodation of developments and extensions in salient unit theories	For example, depending upon the intersection of different archetypes and levels institutions and their effects, SPL building process is variegated. Based on the findings, liability of foreignness can be differentiated from liability of homeness in SPL building process across institutional issues. Based on the findings, scholars can differentiate the legitimacy building process in home and host institutions.

*Definitions: unit theory definitions, and programmatic theory definitions columns were sourced from Cronin et al. (2021).

foundational legitimacy literature over the years. This includes work on how it may be redefined to serve elite interests (c.f. Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023), and on how the ability of vested interests to thwart meaningful climate action by democratic means may redefine what is legitimate and what not (Mittiga, 2022). These concerns could be incorporated into management studies to considerable benefit. Incorporating such developments in the literature may further enhance legitimacy's potential as a unit theory capable of offering stronger explanatory and predictive power.

The Legitimacy-as-process perspective views legitimacy as emerging from dynamic interactions among multiple actors—primarily, though not exclusively, at the macro (organizational field) level. Exploring interactions and examining how legitimacy-building processes differ across various stakeholders—beyond the traditional firm-government dyad (e.g., firm–firm, firm–value chain partners, NGO–firm, trade union–firm)—can significantly enrich and broaden the scope of socio-political legitimacy (SPL) literature. Again, there is the issue as to how elite interests may work to erode the power of stakeholders and redefine what is legitimate to suit their own interests (cf. Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023). This focus is particularly important given that comparative institutional theory emphasizes the dense interrelationships among actors as key mechanisms for conferring more durable forms of legitimacy (e.g., Morgan & Kristensen, 2006). In other words, legitimacy can be relationally constructed, not merely imposed top-down by state authorities (Haack et al., 2014).

Legitimacy as a process assumes that legitimacy evolves over time. The legitimacy-building process is fluid and continuously shaped by the changing socio-political context, as legitimacy is constantly negotiated (Human & Provan, 2000). A threshold or tipping point is reached at some point during the process of establishing legitimacy (Fisher et al., 2016). In this regard, future studies can contribute to theory-building by incorporating both process- and perception-based legitimacy frameworks, while also attending to the institutional context as part of the broader programmatic theory, given that institutions serve as the primary context in the SPL literature (Cronin et al., 2021). Particular issues may arise during severe institutional crisis or decay, and/or when there is a move toward authoritarian populism, which can reshape or redefine what is understood as legitimate at the firm level. For example, there may be pressures to delegitimize EDI and sustainability initiatives. More broadly speaking, legitimacy-as-process research occasionally overlooks relatively constant and exogenous features of legitimacy due to its focus on institutional change.

The legitimacy-as-perception view positions legitimacy as a cross-level process shaped by evaluations, judgements of appropriateness, and interactions between individuals and collectives. From this perspective, understanding how individual-level perceptions aggregate into macro-level legitimacy judgements is central. A further issue is how excessive individualization may work to undermine collectively embedded notions of legitimacy. An example of this is the legitimation of non-state violence by self-appointed guardians of various causes, often as part of populist movements (Carlson, 2019). To further enrich this line of inquiry, future studies could integrate comparative institutionalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Jackson & Deeg, 2008; Schotter et al., 2021), which remains underutilized in empirical SPL research. Comparative institutionalism can complement process and perception-based approaches by illuminating how national and sub-national institutional variations (e.g., liberal vs. coordinated market economies), and indeed, institutional crisis and change, shape SPL-building strategies.

Beyond traditional sociological and economic institutional approaches, other programmatic theories from disciplines such as social psychology and political science can also be incorporated. For instance, the dual-process theory from social psychology—specifically, heuristic-systematic processing (Chaiken, 1989; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990)—explains how social judgments are formed through both heuristic (intuitive, fast) and systematic (analytical, deliberate) modes. This framework could be used to examine how stakeholders assess firms' social and political strategies, especially in SPL contexts, offering a fresh empirical perspective when integrated with legitimacy.

From political science and international relations, the theory of anarchic balancing (Buzan & Little, 1996; Donnelly, 2006) explores how states navigate geopolitical tensions in the absence of a clear hierarchy. This lens could help scholars analyze how MNEs manage legitimacy amid rising geopolitical conflict. For instance, firms may face pressure to align with national agendas (Witt, 2019), leading to SPL tensions between home and host country demands. As politics of legitimacy can be played out to different audiences (Hurrell, 2005), this can create additional pressure for MNEs to find a balance keeping in view the different

demands of home and host markets. For example, in China, firms are increasingly required to establish party offices in their sites, reflecting the heightened complexity of SPL-building in host markets. In such contexts, the influence of global public opinion and NGOs becomes particularly salient, requiring firms to pay closer attention to the diverse demands of stakeholders.

A key tension in current SPL literature is the conflation of different institutional strands, most notably organizational institutionalism and comparative institutionalism (but sometimes also economic institutionalism) which may constraint understanding on SPL (e.g., in liberal vs coordinated economies) (Schotter et al., 2021), particularly in times of institutional crisis or change. Furthermore, there should be a concern in providing precise nature of linkages between legitimation activities on institutional reconfiguration and changes. A key notable tension in the literature is mixing of institutional theoretical strands and lack of consideration to the comparative institutionalism (CI). While both perspectives are prevalent in IB, they stem from different intellectual traditions. Organizational institutionalism emphasizes sociological neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), whereas CI focuses on the political economy and variation in national institutional configurations (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 1999). The latter highlights the key role of interest groupings in the legitimation process, and how inclusive the latter is. Elites in different countries exercise power in distinct ways, and in some varieties of capitalism, legitimation tends to be more top-down and/or more accommodating of stakeholder interests than others (Morgan, 2016).

Despite their distinct origins, many studies mix very different institutional traditions without clearly distinguishing their theoretical origins (Schotter et al., 2021). For example (Bucheli & Salvaj, 2018), combine both economic (Davis & North, 1970) and sociological (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) institutional perspectives. Similar conflations appear in studies by Amer (2023), de Lange (2016), Bucheli and Kim (2012) and Trevino et al. (2008). Even Li et al. (2018), who blur the lines between CI and sociological strands. Such mixing can broaden the range of phenomena covered but may obscure fine-grained theoretical contributions and hinder theoretical clarity. Achieving theoretical synthesis—even within broad areas of theorizing—is notoriously difficult, with theoretical juxtapositions being far more common.

Although CI has been influential in other areas of international business and strategy (Kern & Gospel, 2023), its application to SPL remains limited. Future studies should therefore more clearly articulate their alignment with specific institutional strands—organizational, economic, or socio-economic—and clarify how legitimacy, as a unit theory, enhances their theoretical contributions. Finally, future research could expand legitimacy theory by considering underexplored dimensions such as ideological and cognitive legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011), which are central to understanding how legitimacy is constructed in contested and dynamic institutional environments.

7.2. Contextual development

The review shows a strong emphasis on large MNEs. However, the socio-political legitimacy building process can differ significantly for small and medium-sized new ventures, micro-multinationals, family firms, business groups, social enterprises, and born digital firms. Furthermore, platform firms—given their ongoing international expansions—can offer important contextual insights (Garud et al., 2022; Taeuscher & Rothe, 2021). There is a noticeable focus on MNE-government relationships, but future studies should also consider other relational contexts, such as firm–firm, firm–NGO, and firm–trade union interactions. This expansion is critical, as external actors—such as NGOs and global activists—are becoming increasingly influential, requiring firms to be more responsive to their concerns. Moreover, most existing research adopts a broad MNE-centric perspective. There is scope to explore how various market entry strategies—such as alliances and joint ventures—navigate the process of establishing SPL in each other's markets. Similarly, future research could examine the legitimacy challenges firms face when re-entering a market after an exit. Additional studies might also investigate the influence of multiple institutional environments and the difficulties firms encounter in reconciling legitimacy expectations in their home country with those in host countries—particularly in light of the recent populist turn in the U.S. and other regions. There are also persistent tensions around reconciling Western and non-Western markets stakeholders' expectations, alongside shifts in their relative power (Jones & Murray, 2025). These complexities remain underexplored, as much of the literature continues to focus predominately on host-market contexts. What makes this particularly challenging is that populist-authoritarian governments are often prone to erratic and capricious decision making, meaning that the gains of painstaking legitimacy-building efforts may be reversed overnight. Moreover, within nations, such dynamics may force firms to choose between political and social legitimacy, or to appeal to one social group (e.g., supporters of an authoritarian regime) at the expense of others.

Empirical studies also tend to focus on single-country contexts, predominantly China (as an emerging economy) and the USA (as an advanced economy). These studies often treat the nation-state as the sole unit of analysis, overlooking larger blocs (e.g., "the West," BRICS, democracies vs. non-democracies), economic or political groupings (e.g., the EU), or even subnational regions (e.g., U.S. states, Catalonia, Kashmir), or extrapolate single country cases as representative of a broad category. Examples of the latter would be China being used interchangeably with state capitalism (when the latter is a much broader concept) and assumptions that all liberal markets are like US.

Furthermore, many studies assume that emerging markets are inherently characterized by institutional challenges, and mature ones quite stable, which is certainly no longer true. Future studies could benefit from comparative studies between advanced and emerging markets, or indeed, challenging the sometimes-lazy distinction between the two, with evidence-based assessments as to what sets of institutional features work better or worse where. This may also take account of institutional crisis or decay, and how seemingly mature institutional contexts may drift towards institutional realities more commonly associated with emerging ones. In turn, this would make for a more nuanced understanding as to how institutional contexts influence legitimacy and the legitimation process.

Given that socio-political research often requires data collection across multiple institutional settings, we recommend collaborative research approaches, deepening scholarly dialogue between nations, bringing together different perspectives on what constitutes legitimacy around the world. Involving legitimacy evaluators directly could enrich insights into the expectations and norms that shape legitimacy across contexts.

7.3. Methodological development

Our review shows several important avenues for methodological advancement in the field. Notably, there remains minimal consensus among researchers regarding methodological and contextual approaches. A substantial portion of qualitative methods are based on interview data. Conceptual studies, which develop propositions and theoretical frameworks also form a significant part of the literature. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, have primarily used panel data and surveys. This highlights a clear opportunity for offering methodological contributions. Within qualitative research, future studies could benefit from adopting historical perspectives. Comparative and transnational historical research can enhance understanding of the long-term challenges and consequences associated with business non-market activities—both social and political.

From a quantitative standpoint, researchers could adopt time-series and longitudinal research designs to examine how strategic changes influence legitimacy over time. In addition, more robust experimental approaches and novel methods from other disciplines can be integrated

into the field. For example, ethnographic fieldwork from anthropology could provide more nuanced insights into the dynamics of legitimacy-building over time, particularly by revealing how MNEs manage local belief systems and social expectations. Future studies should pay greater attention to how legitimacy is embedded in everyday cultural practices and meanings, as this can help explain why certain corporate actions are accepted in some contexts but resisted in others (Guardian, 2020). The Implicit Association Test (IAT), borrowed from psychology, also presents a promising avenue. By applying the IAT, researchers can explore differences between implicit (subconscious) and explicit (conscious, typically survey-based) evaluations of legitimacy. This is not to suggest that survey-only studies are without value; however, an overemphasis on the risks of common method variance bias may lead to the limitations of alternative methods being ignored, and the many strengths of such work being overlooked. This, in turn, means that the value of an important corpus of IB research may be undermined.

Legitimacy processes are still underexplored in terms of how they unfold in practice. In this regard, researchers can uncover insights from previously untapped sources, such as news media and practitioner-oriented outlets possibly using big data. In addition, necessary-conditions analysis can be utilized to identify variables critical to achieving legitimacy as outcomes (c.f. Aguinis et al., 2020). Researchers may also develop a typology of SPL, outlining key sources, triggers, and firm responses. Typologies can also serve as valuable theory-building tools (Doty & Glick, 1994).

Despite legitimacy being a central construct across the social sciences, its empirical treatment remains fragmented, inconsistent, and often under-theorized. Our review of highly cited studies (Table 9) reveals that legitimacy is frequently treated conceptually and measured using a narrow range of methods—most commonly stakeholder perception surveys. These typically involve the mass public, employees, or elites, and use proxies such as institutional support, nascent political ambition, or norms and beliefs about corruption. While these are useful, they often capture only the perceptual dimension, missing the dynamic interplay between process, perception, and property. As a result, they obscure how legitimacy is constructed, maintained, or lost over time—especially in complex, multi-level institutional contexts.

The review also suggests that approaches to legitimacy also vary significantly across disciplines. In political science, legitimacy is often linked to regime stability and institutional trust (c.f. Gibson et al., 1998; Lipset, 1959; Weatherford, 1992). Empirical work here relies heavily on survey-based indicators, such as diffuse support and confidence in institutions—capturing perceptions but often missing underlying processes or legitimacy as an institutional property.

Sociology emphasizes legitimacy as a socially constructed process shaped by shared norms and values (Johnson et al., 2006; Lamont, 2012). While conceptually rich, empirical treatments are less standardized. Some studies e.g., Rao et al. (2003) incorporate longitudinal and field-level data, capturing process and property dimensions more effectively, but these remain relatively rare.

In IB and organizational research, legitimacy is framed through institutional complexity, stakeholder perceptions, and rhetorical strategies (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). These perspectives begin to bridge perception, process, and property, but empirical work still leans heavily on perception-based or conceptual proxies and rarely integrates multiple dimensions within a single design.

Across fields, few studies attempt to measure legitimacy holistically. Longitudinal and multi-method approaches—essential for understanding how legitimacy evolves, erodes, or is rebuilt—remain underutilized. Legitimacy is often treated as a dependent variable, but rarely explored as a construct that is actively produced and negotiated in context (c.f. Schotter et al., 2021). Moreover, operational choices are not always theoretically grounded. Proxies such as inequality, or ambition are often selected pragmatically, with limited alignment to legitimacy's conceptual foundations.

To address these gaps, more robust designs are needed—especially

Table 9
Operationalization of legitimacy in leading studies by citation count.

Field	Citations	Operationalization of legitimacy
Political Science		
Lipset, S. M. (1959). Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy1. *American political science review, 53*, 69–105.	12854	The paper conceptualizes legitimacy as the "*degree to which institutions valued for themselves and considered right and proper*" (p. 71). The author identifies two key conditions under which a "crisis of legitimacy" may emerge during periods of structural change, threatening democratic stability: "*(1) when all major groups do not secure access to political system early in transitional period, or at least soon as they develop political demands, and (2) when a status of major conservative institution is threatened during the period of structural change*" (p. 87). This study operationalizes legitimacy indirectly through a comparative logic by correlating regime stability with socioeconomic indicators that plausibly shape citizens' perceptions of their political system. The socioeconomic indicators, such as income, literacy, and urbanization, are used to support the claim that economic development fosters political legitimacy. Legitimacy itself is treated as a conceptual outcome, proxied by regime stability and elite consensus, rather than operationalized as a discrete variable.
Gibson, J. L., Caldeira, G. A., & Baird, V. A. (1998). On the legitimacy of national high courts. *American political science review, 92*, 343–358.	1047	The process of court legitimacy building is grounded in public satisfaction with policy outputs and in knowledge and awareness of the court, resulting in the diffusion of support. Average scores on diffuse support for the national high court are used as a measure of institutional legitimacy. The first set of surveys, based on Eurobarometer reinterviews, was conducted across EU countries to assess public attitudes toward the European Court of Justice and national high courts. The second set surveyed the general public in six European countries and the U.S. as part of a project on law, legal consciousness, and democratization.
Weatherford, M. S. (1992). Measuring political legitimacy. *American political science review, 86*, 149–166.	904	Based on data from the U.S. electorate, the study conceptualized and measured legitimacy orientations across two dimensions: system-level performance judgments (with representational processes and government performance as second-order factors) and personal or citizen-level traits (with interpersonal assurance and political involvement as second-order factors).
Gibson, J. L., Caldeira, G. A., & Spence, L. K. (2003). Measuring attitudes toward the United States supreme court. *American journal of political science, 47*, 354–367.	598	Using national survey data, the study operationalizes institutional legitimacy as a multi-dimensional construct, including confidence in the institution's leader, overall approval, satisfaction with court performance and policy, evaluation of specific policy outputs, and diffuse support (i.e., institutional loyalty).

(*continued on next page*)

Table 9 (*continued*)

Field	Citations	Operationalization of legitimacy
		These serve as indicators of public attitudes toward the Supreme Court.
Fox, R. L., & Lawless, J. L. (2005). To run or not to run for office: Explaining nascent political ambition. *American journal of political science, 49*, 642–659.	545	Democratic legitimacy is perceived to exist when citizens feel included in the political process. Using national survey data of individuals most likely to pursue a political career, the study measures democratic legitimacy through nascent political ambition. The sample is stratified by sex to explore gender differences in political ambition, highlighting an important dimension of political representation and democratic legitimacy.
Sociology		
Podolny, J. M., & Page, K. L. (1998). Network forms of organization. *Annual review of sociology, 24*, 57–76.	3030	This literature review-based conceptual synthesis study defines legitimacy as a factor that enhances status. It operationalizes legitimacy in context of network form of organization, conceptualizing such networks as involving multiple actors engaged in repeated joint exchange and collaboration—yet lacking a central authority with legitimate power to arbitrate and resolve conflicts during relational exchanges.
Rao, H., Monin, P., & Durand, R. (2003). Institutional change in Toque Ville: Nouvelle cuisine as an identity movement in French gastronomy. *American journal of sociology, 108*, 795–843.	2558	Sociopolitical legitimacy of activists is conceptualized as their recognized authority and embeddedness within field-level institutions. It is operationalized as the proportion of executive board positions in the Maîtres Cuisiniers de France held by chefs publicly identified as nouvelle cuisine activists — those whose signature dishes consistently reflect the nouvelle cuisine style and who are acknowledged by culinary journalists. The study draws data from multiple sources, including interviews of gastronomic critics and culinary faculty, archival data from the Guide Michelin, and bibliographic databases, to compile a longitudinal panel dataset on elite French chefs. Legitimacy is measured through interpretive tracing of field-level cues.
Lamont, M. (2012). Toward a comparative sociology of valuation and evaluation. *Annual review of sociology, 38*, 201–221.	1931	This review article defines *"legitimation"* in terms of symbolic capital associated with recognition.
Johnson, C., Dowd, T. J., & Ridgeway, C. L. (2006). Legitimacy as a social process. *Annu. Rev. Sociol., 32*, 53–78.	1469	This literature review and conceptual synthesis article explores legitimacy as a social process from both social psychology and organizational perspectives. While the approaches differ slightly across the two fields, the definitions share four key similarities: i) Legitimacy involves the construction of social reality. It is the interpretation of a social object as being aligned with cultural values, standards, and beliefs that are assumed to be shared both by members of a broader community (e.g., an organization or society) and by those in the immediate local context. Through this process of interpretation, what *is* becomes what is *right*, (ii) Legitimacy is essentially a collective process, even though it is mediated by individual perceptions and behaviors. The presumed existence of a social audience—those who embrace shared values, norms, and beliefs—makes it possible (and necessary) for an object to be seen as legitimate, iii) Legitimacy is dependent upon apparent consensus, which may not reflect actual agreement. It rests on the perception that most people in the local context accept the object as legitimate, (iv) Legitimation is a communal construction of social reality, comprising both a normative (prescriptive) dimension—framing the object as *right*—and a cognitive dimension—making the object appear *legitimate* to the actors involved.
Jong-Sung, Y., & Khagram, S. (2005). A comparative study of inequality and corruption. *American sociological review, 70*, 136–157.	1323	The study conceptualizes legitimacy as the perceived fairness and moral authority of political institutions and rules. It argues that income inequality undermines legitimacy by fostering public beliefs that institutions serve elite interests rather than the broader population. This erosion of legitimacy contributes to the normalization and tolerance of corrupt behaviour. The study implicitly measures perceptions of legitimacy through norms and beliefs about corruption, which are assessed using survey data, particularly the World Values Survey. They treat legitimacy as a normative and perceptual phenomenon—not a formal institutional rating, but a reflection of how ordinary citizens view the moral and procedural validity of their institutions. In this sense, legitimacy is measured through belief systems, not institutional metrics.
International Business		
Kostova, T., & Zaheer, S. 1999. Organizational legitimacy under conditions of complexity: The case of the mul tinational enterprise. Academy of Management Re- view, 24: 64–81.	4537	The study discusses the conditions of three types of complexity: i) the complexity of the legitimacy environment, ii) the organization, and iii) the process of legitimation that MNEs encounter. This conceptual study develops propositions based on the degree of challenge MNEs and their subunits encounter in establishing and maintaining legitimacy.
Kostova, T., & Roth, K. (2002). Adoption of an organizational practice by subsidiaries of multinational corporations: Institutional and relational effects. Academy of management journal, 45(1), 215–233.	4025	The study argues that foreign subsidiaries must maintain legitimacy when dealing with institutional duality. When organizational practices become institutionalized, they are perceived by society as legitimate. This study examines the adoption of organizational practices by subsidiaries of multinational enterprises (MNEs), focusing on both institutional factors (regulatory, cognitive, and normative) and relational factors (trust, dependence, and identification). Two surveys were conducted: one targeting senior subsidiary management and the

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Table 9 (*continued*)

Field	Citations	Operationalization of legitimacy
		other non-managerial employees. Legitimacy is primarily conceptualized as perception-based—that is, how organizational practices are perceived by relevant stakeholders.
Suddaby, R., & Greenwood, R. (2005). Rhetorical strategies of legitimacy. Administrative science quarterly, 50(1), 35–67.	3773	This paper employs interpretive content and rhetorical analysis to examine the rhetoric in legitimating profound institutional change. Specifically, the study discusses the discursive struggle between the proponents and opponents of new organizational forms. Three observations form the basis for their theoretical arguments: i) new organizational forms do not routinely emerge to serve the resource opportunities. Obtaining legitimacy is central concern; ii) legitimacy standards are encoded within institutional logics, hence necessary to adapt the logic in order to legitimize an organizational form; iii) rhetorical strategies constitute the process through which legitimacy is achieved.
Zimmerman, M. A., & Zeitz, G. J. (2002). Beyond survival: Achieving new venture growth by building legitimacy. Academy of management review, 27(3), 414–431.	3783	This conceptual (propositions based) article argues that legitimacy is a critical resource (property-based legitimacy) essential for gaining other resources. These resources, in turn, are vital for firm growth. The article also emphasizes that legitimacy can be enhanced through strategic actions (the process of legitimacy building). Specifically, it discusses different types of legitimacy—regulatory, normative, cognitive, and industry—and their effects on resource acquisition and growth.
Bitektine, Alex. "Toward a theory of social judgments of organizations: The case of legitimacy, reputation, and status." Academy of management review 36, no. 1 (2011): 151–179.	1942	This conceptual (propositions based) study adopts the evaluator's perspective on cognitive and sociopolitical legitimacy, viewing reputation and status as forms of social judgements (perception). It explains the process through which evaluators make judgements under bounded rationality, highlighting how cognitive and social factors influence this mechanism.

those combining content analysis, network mapping, and field-level data to trace legitimacy as an evolving, contested construct. For example, discourse analysis could uncover how actors frame or challenge legitimacy in real time, while historical or experimental methods could help unpack causal and temporal dynamics

IB scholarship, in particular, stands to benefit from cross-disciplinary exchange. Situated at the nexus of multiple institutional logics, IB is well-positioned to integrate insights from other fields. Political science offers structured tools to track legitimacy under changing governance conditions, while sociology contributes processual methods to study how legitimacy is constructed and disrupted at the field level. IB research could adopt longitudinal designs, discourse analysis, and network-based approaches to better understand how legitimacy operates across geographies and organizational levels. There is strong potential for methodological and theoretical exchange. For example, IB studies can benefit from adopting longitudinal and historical approaches, and ethnography from sociology; and experimental designs from political science and sociology, to better understand the causal and temporal dynamics of legitimacy.

At the same time, IB can contribute back by testing these approaches in complex, multi-level institutional settings that are the defining features of MNEs. Such cross-fertilization would not only improve conceptual clarity but also support more robust, context-sensitive measurement strategies. Comparative studies across subsidiaries, industries, and countries offers fertile ground to advance legitimacy as both a unit theory and empirical construct within IB.

In recent IB literature, legitimacy has begun to move beyond binary conceptualizations (legitimate vs. not) toward more nuanced treatments of its degrees and sources (Andrews et al., 2022; Rana & Sørensen, 2021; Schotter et al., 2021). However, empirical work still lacks granularity—for example, distinguishing between pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy (c.f. Suchman, 1995), or capturing cycles of legitimacy loss and recovery.

Cross-disciplinary learning can support richer, more context-sensitive operationalizations. Synthesizing measurement approaches from political science (e.g., institutional trust), sociology (e.g., field-level legitimation), and organizational theory (e.g., stakeholder judgment frameworks) may allow IB scholars to better capture legitimacy not only as an outcome, but as a process of ongoing negotiation.

8. Conclusion

Fig. 3 presents a consolidated view of the key issues and tensions identified in the current literature, as well as avenues for future contributions.

This article makes the following central contributions. First, unlike previous systematic reviews in IB that consolidate knowledge within IB and management fields (Debellis et al., 2021; Pisani et al., 2017), *this* interdisciplinary review synthesizes the social, political, and socio-political dimensions of legitimacy from IB, sociology, and political science. *It clarifies* how legitimacy is conceptualized across disciplines and highlights both distinct features and common grounds in the literature. It further highlights the relevance of recent theoretical developments in the foundation disciplines for developing IB research around legitimacy.

Second, the review locates legitimacy as a unit theory within broader programmatic theory development. As noted above, unit theories focus on a single phenomenon, while programmatic theories encompass multiple phenomena (e.g., institutional theory). We explore legitimacy as a unit theory and how it can contribute to broader institutionalist programmatic theorizing (Zhao et al., 2017).

Third, within the IB literature, different strands of institutional theory are often conflated (c.f. Schotter et al., 2021). We explore the relative prevalence of such thinking when it comes to understanding legitimacy's place in institutional theorizing, and how closer attention to the disciplinary foundations of the latter might contribute to more rigorous theorizing. Legitimacy is a multi-faceted concept (e.g., property, process, and perception), but much of the research focuses only on the process. Our review highlights how developments in political science and sociology can enrich the IB literature, given its interdisciplinary nature.

Fourth, the review reveals an emphasis in the field on MNE-government relations and societal interactions, but less attention given to firm-to-firm relationships and interactions with trade unions, NGOs, and other civil society groupings, or indeed, on how elite interests may work to remake the basis of legitimacy Furthermore, future studies can explore both horizontal legitimacy (i.e., between the subjects operating at the same organization levels e.g., two or more subsidiaries) and vertical legitimacy (i.e., between different levels e.g., parent company and subsidiary) (Haack et al., 2014). As external factors such as NGOs and global social and political activists gain influence but also face pushback from entrenched interests, firms must consider their concerns beyond their home and host countries. The review consolidates knowledge on legitimacy-building for practitioners. However, it does not

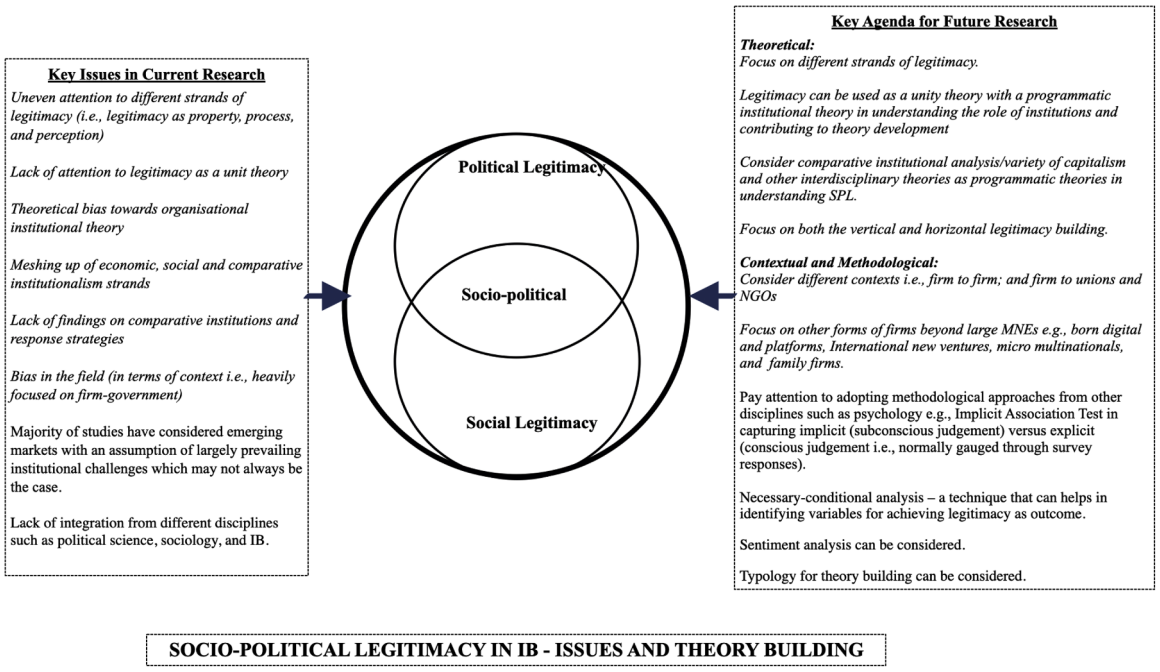

Fig. 3. Summary of key issues and avenues for theory development.

address other forms of legitimation (e.g., internal, media, technical), which could be explored in future studies.

Finally, the pursuit of social legitimacy may undermine political legitimacy, and vice versa. A great deal depends on the social base of the state, relative democracy and the stability of political institutions. Both types of legitimacy seeking may be broad or narrow based; the former seeks to secure legitimacy from a wide range of other actors, and the latter from a few powerful interest groupings. Although it may seem in the long-term interest of MNEs to seek as broadly based legitimacy as possible, authoritarian systems may prove quite durable, and the exact timing of their collapse hard to predict. Hence, many MNEs err on the side of expediency, engaging in rapid bursts of re-legitimation activities after changes; this raises the questions as to where and how such processes are effective. This is especially the case if home and host authoritarian governments may impose very different, and, at times, contradictory, demands, Again, the return of a multipolar world, with different competing actors, all claiming some or other special status forces firms into awkward choices as to from whom and where to seek legitimacy. This is particularly challenging given the rise of populist authoritarianism, the largely unaccountable, yet undeniably influential, social media ecosystem, and the narrow definitions of legitimacy set by such movements and governments. In turn, this raises a wide range of ethical issues around from whom should legitimacy be sought, and when does this represent unethical behavior.

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Huda Khan: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Zaheer Khan:** Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Geoffrey Wood:** Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Oded Shenkar:** Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Appendix I (Tables)

Table 1
Exemplars of coding strategy.

References	Legitimacy Strand	Legitimacy dimension	Theme to be added from the coded data	Conceptualization/ definition provided	How legitimacy is captured	Theory	Data Sources	Context	Firm type
Kölbel, J. F., & Busch, T. (2021). Signalling legitimacy across	Socio-political	Process	Nonmarket: social	Compliance with legal rules and moral norms that governs firm's	CSR rating and default risks relationships as	Institutional Theory	Panel	Advanced Markets: Germany,	Credit rating agencies

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Table 1 (*continued*)

References	Legitimacy Strand	Legitimacy dimension	Theme to be added from the coded data	Conceptualization/ definition provided	How legitimacy is captured	Theory	Data Sources	Context	Firm type
institutional contexts—The intermediary role of corporate social responsibility rating agencies. Global Strategy Journal, 11 (2), 304–328.				relationships within a society	assumed proxies of legitimacy measure under regulatory and cultural distance			Switzerland, US, Australia, UK, Italy, Canada, France, Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Spain, Japan	
Zhang, H., Young, M. N., Tan, J., & Sun, W. (2018). How Chinese companies deal with a legitimacy imbalance when acquiring firms from developed economies. Journal of World Business, 53 (5), 752–767.	Socio-political	Process	Nonmarket: social and political	Defines legitimacy as a process of social judgement accorded to the firm by stakeholders (e.g. external co investors and government). MNEs employs strategies for balancing legitimacy imbalance (both internally and externally) when entering developed markets.	Internal and external legitimacy strategies during pre-acquisition, during acquisition and post-acquisition stages.	Institutional Theory	Interviews and secondary (archival) data	Chinese firms in Advanced Markets: Germany, Hongkong, US & Italy	Merger and Acquisitions
Zheng, Q., Luo, Y., & Maksimov, V. (2015). Achieving legitimacy through corporate social responsibility: The case of emerging economy firms. Journal of world business, 50(3), 389–403.	Socio-political	Perception achieved through Process	Nonmarket: social and political	External and Internal legitimacy are conceptualised as perceived CSR outcomes, however it is achieved through legitimation strategies simultaneously: compliance and strategic adaptation	External legitimacy is the extent to which a firm achieves approval of its actions with outsider stakeholders such as customers, partners and non-governmental organisations, whereas internal legitimacy is the extent to which employees perceive the firm's mission and operations as appropriate.	Institutional theory; Stakeholder theory	Survey	Emerging market: China	Foreign invested, state-owned, and private domestic firms
Bangara, A., Freeman, S., & Schroder, W. (2012). Legitimacy and accelerated internationalisation: An Indian perspective. Journal of World Business, 47 (4), 623–634.	Social	Process	liability of foreignness (changed from non-market: social)	Conceptualised normative legitimacy as corresponding to the unfamiliar norms and practices	To achieve legitimacy, the emerging market SME are required to be resilient to survive in its domestic environment and employ legitimacy gaining tactics in adapting to the advanced economy environment with its unfamiliar norms and practices.	Institutional theory	Interviews and supplementary data collected through secondary sources (published company materials, interviews in the media, financial newspapers, trade magazines, and other media reports)	Emerging market: India into the Western markets	SMEs
Nell, P. C., Puck, J., & Heidenreich, S. (2015). Strictly limited choice or agency? Institutional duality, legitimacy, and subsidiaries' political strategies. Journal of World Business, 50(2), 302–311.	Socio-political	Process	Nonmarket: social and political	Political strategies as an actor specific negotiation of subsidiary aimed at social construction of subsidiary' acceptance and approval in host market, implying legitimacy among the non-market actors	External political strategy as a mean to negotiate and socially construct legitimacy; whereby political activism (measured as subsidiary information strategy, financial	Institutional theory; agency perspective	Survey	MNEs from US, Asia and Europe, whose subsidiaries are based in Emerging markets: China, India, South Africa, & Turkey.	MNEs subsidiaries

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Table 1 (*continued*)

References	Legitimacy Strand	Legitimacy dimension	Theme to be added from the coded data	Conceptualization/ definition provided	How legitimacy is captured	Theory	Data Sources	Context	Firm type
					incentive strategy, and reputation building including supporting NGOs and policy issues, and forming coalitions with non-industry actors) is used as a proxy of legitimacy				
Torres de Oliveira, R., Sahasranamam, S., Figueira, S., & Paul, J. (2020). Upgrading without formal integration in M&A: The role of social integration. Global Strategy Journal, 10 (3), 619–652.	Social	Process	Nonmarket: social	This work argues that owing to the liability of foreignness and poor image, emerging market firms lack legitimacy and needs to build through social integration.	Environmental and cognitive social integration are processes between acquirer and subsidiary promotes trust and legitimacy	Social integration perspective	Interviews and secondary data (based on company reports and non-confidential information)	Chinese firms' acquisition of German firm	Merger and Acquisitions
Campbell, J. T., Eden, L., & Miller, S. R. (2012). Multinationals and corporate social responsibility in host countries: Does distance matter?. Journal of International Business Studies, 43, 84–106.	Social	Process	Nonmarket: social	Legitimacy is socially established framework of standards, values, definitions, and beliefs, whereby an entity's activities are desirable, right, or suitable.	CSR as a coping mechanism for liability of foreignness, enabling foreign affiliates to improve social legitimacy in the host markets	Institutional Theory	Panel: Community Reinvestment Act dataset.	Advanced Market: US	MNEs foreign affiliates
Jia, N. (2018). The "make and/or buy" decisions of corporate political lobbying: Integrating the economic efficiency and legitimacy perspectives. Academy of Management Review, 43(2), 307–326.	Political	Perceived, and accordingly firms react (process)	Nonmarket: political	Political audience acceptance or rejection of firm activity (lobbying, based on the quality of lobbying content), and judgement regarding the legitimacy of lobby entity in order to draw inferences about the quality of lobbying context	Firm sourcing decisions influenced by the political audience perception regarding focal firms' legitimacy and that conferred on the external lobbying professionals	Legitimacy perspective in lobbying	Conceptual: proposition based	Not applicable	MNEs generally
Li, J., Xia, J., Zajac, E. J., & Lin, Z. (2022). Have a go or lay low? Predicting firms' rhetorical commitment versus avoidance in response to polylithic governmental pressures. Journal of Management Studies.	Political	Process	Nonmarket: political	Conformance to governmental pressure	Firm political behaviour and pursuit of political legitimacy in response polylithic pressures. Measured as a rhetorical commitment to a foreign policy proposed by the home government.	Institutional Theory	Panel	China (focal firms); and its subsidiaries in politically aligned and misaligned host markets.	MNEs generally

*Although grey highlights were not coded in original coding sheet, we included in the sample sheet to provide a more comprehensive view of the data in terms of legitimacy conceptualization and measurement.

Table 2
SPL conceptualization in sociology and political science fields.

S	Reference	Journal	Type	Dimension	Conceptualization
POLITICAL SCIENCE					
1	Weatherford (1992)	*APSR*	Political system legitimacy	Perception, process & property	The study conceptualized and measured legitimacy orientations across two dimensions: system-level performance judgments (with representational processes and government performance as second-order factors) and personal or citizen-level traits (with interpersonal assurance and political involvement as second-order factors).
2	Piccolo (2024)	*AJPS*	Legitimacy of indigenous sovereignty	Property	Legitimacy of indigenous sovereignty exists when it procures the common good of the people.
3	Bischof and Wagner (2019)	*AJPS*	Political party legitimacy	Perception	Political parties as being socially acceptable
4	Fraser (1974)	*AJPS*	National politician legitimacy	Perception	Sense of national political legitimacy gauged through malevolent politicians, efficacy-cynicism, worry about democracy, government power to do bad, unused government power, and violence efficacy.
5	Landis (2018, p. 2)	*APSR*	Political party legitimacy	Perception	Considers the role play by political parties in securing political legitimacy, conceptualized as "that ideal is practiced or understood by the citizens"
6	Lipset (1959, p 71; p. 87)	*APSR*	Institutional legitimacy	Perception	The paper conceptualizes legitimacy as the "*degree to which institutions valued for themselves and considered right and proper*" (p. 71). The author identifies two key conditions under which a "crisis of legitimacy" may emerge during periods of structural change, threatening democratic stability: "*(1) when all major groups do not secure access to political system early in transitional period, or at least soon as they develop political demands, and (2) when a status of major conservative institution is threatened during the period of structural change"* (p. 87).
7	Merelman (1966, p. 548)	*APSR*	Government legitimacy	Perception	Political legitimacy is the quality of "oughtness" that is perceived by the public to inhere in a political regime. In other words, government is viewed as morally proper for the society.
8	Mikulaschek, Pant and Tesfaye (2020)	*AJPS*	Government legitimacy	Perception	A government is perceived as legitimate when it is believed to have the right to rule
9	Malesky and Taussig (2019)	*APSR*	Government legitimacy	Process	Conceptualized a what processes government should adopt in enhancing the perceptions as being a legitimate regulator who produces regulations to follow.
10	J. Fox and Breslawski (2023)	*APSR*	Government legitimacy	Perception	Government legitimacy captured and conceptualized as a perceived confidence in government, which is arguably affected due to state support for a religion.
11	Mittiga (2022, p. 2)	*APSR*	Political legitimacy in terms of Democracy or basic rights	Perception & property	Foundational legitimacy is conceptualized in terms of "citizen's essential safety needs is met", and contingent legitimacy in terms of "power used by the government to maintain foundational legitimacy and perceived acceptable to those subjected to it"
12	McDonough, Barnes and Pina (1986, p. 739)	*APSR*	Democratic legitimacy	Perception	Extent to which political system is perceived as "coherent wholes, differing more from one another than within themselves on grounds of economic, social, and political performance"
13	Hutton Ferris (2024)	*AJPS*	Democratic legitimacy	Process & perception	Political representation systems are most likely to foster democratic legitimacy when they are designed in a way that embodies a mutually supporting relationship between democratic simplicity, broad inclusion, and networked responsiveness. These processes help guiding judgements regarding democratically legitimate relations between electoral, administrative, and societal representatives.
14	R. L. Fox and Lawless (2005)	*APSR*	Democratic legitimacy	Perception	Democratic legitimacy is perceived as legitimate when citizens have a feeling of inclusion in the political process.
15	Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo (2019, p. 115)	*AJPS*	Democratic legitimacy	Perception	Inclusive representation increases perception of democratic legitimacy, conceptualized as "popular belief among citizens that their government is acting competently, impartially, and in the service of entire population."
16	Ginnane (2024)	*AJPS*	Democratic legitimacy	Property	Suggests democratic legitimacy as the condition in which political boundaries are open to contestation and redefinition, ensuring that alternative visions of the people are respected and treated as legitimate.
17	Espejo (2014)	*AJPS*	Democratic legitimacy	Property	States have jurisdictional authority over a territory, and territorial holding must be rightful.
18	Gibson, Caldeira and Baird (1998)	*APSR*	Court legitimacy	Process	The process of court legitimacy building is grounded in public satisfaction with policy outputs and in knowledge and awareness of the court, resulting in the diffusion of support.
19	Gibson (2008)		Court legitimacy	Perception	Worthy of respect, deference, and obedience.
20	Gibson (2024, p. 1042)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Perception	"Institutions perceived as legitimate have a widely accepted ability to make binding judgements for a political community; those without legitimacy often find their authority contested"
21	Christenson and Glick (2015, p. 5)	*APSR*	Court legitimacy	Perception	Court legitimacy is conceptualized as "the respondents' perception regarding disagreeable decisions would lead the respondents to favor doing away the court, to view court as too political, to say that court favors some groups, and to hold the opinion that the court can be trusted to make decisions that are right for the country, and in the best interest of people.".
22	Gibson and Caldeira (2009, p. 143)	*APSR*	Court legitimacy	Property	Courts' impartiality and strict adherence to the law are conceptualized as their legitimacy symbols.
23	Bartels and Johnston (2013, p. 184)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Perception	Conceptualized as "how people perceive the court's ideological tenor"

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Table 2 (*continued*)

S	Reference	Journal	Type	Dimension	Conceptualization
24	Gibson and Nelson (2015, pp. 167–168)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Perception	Court legitimacy is judged on the basis of the stronger means of controlling the actions of the court, court's less independence so that it listens a lot more to what the people want, judges on who consistently make decisions at odds with what a majority of the people want should be removed, trust in court justices such that those are in the best interests of country, a lot of decisions that most people disagree with, mixing up in politics, and the reduction in the right of the court in decide certain types of controversial issues.
25	Clark (2009)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Perception	Court sensitivity regarding being perceived legitimate by the public and members of the bar.
26	Ura (2014)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Perception	Public perception of court's persuasive decision and procedural fairness.
27	Caldeira and Gibson (1995)	*APSR*	Court legitimacy	Perception	visibility among mass public
28	Nicholson and Hansford (2014, p. 1)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Property	Court legitimacy as a conferring function which serves to increase public acceptance of its decision.
29	Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence (2003)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Perception	The study conceptualizes institutional legitimacy as a multi-dimensional construct, including confidence in the institution's leader, overall approval, satisfaction with court performance and policy, evaluation of specific policy outputs, and diffuse support (i.e., institutional loyalty). These serve as indicators of public attitudes toward the Supreme Court.
30	Gibler and Randazzo (2011)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Process	By rendering a number of rulings that the other political players accept, courts establish legitimacy. Courts attempt to maintain their legitimacy by making decisions that are controversial or inconsistent. For this reason, courts frequently uphold public opinion and frequently use strategy when selecting cases and rendering. There are a number of intriguing ramifications for new and dependent courts from this process of establishing legitimacy and bolstering the court's political authority.
31	Staton (2006, p. 99)	*AJPS*	Court (judiciary) legitimacy	Property & perception	"Diffuse public support to deep commitment to institutional integrity of judiciary"; and court reliance on social beliefs in gaining compliance.
32	Bartels and Kramon (2022)	*AJPS*	Court legitimacy	Perception	Rightful authority in the political system.
33	Gibson and Caldeira (1995)	*AJPS*	Legitimacy of legal institutions	Perception	Perception regarding diffuse support and acceptance of, and compliance with judicial decisions.
34	Allee and Huth (2006)	*APSR*	Legitimacy of legal awards	Property	Legitimacy of legal awards stems from four features: i) neutral and balanced composition of international courts; ii) decisions reached should be viewed as legitimate on procedural grounds; iii) on substantive grounds explicit reliance on legal principles; iv) states agree in advanced to accept the final ruling when they submit the dispute for legal resolution.
35	Ono and Zilis (2022, p. 43)	*AJPS*	Law legitimacy	Perception	Perception of procedural fairness.
36	T. Smith (1951, p. 702)	*APSR*	Legitimacy of power	Property	"Legitimacy is ubiquity of power disciplined to the uses of perfection"
37	De Bruin, Levy, SCHUBIGER and Weintraub (2024, p. 3)	*APSR*	Legitimacy of an authority (ruler)	Process	Legitimacy can be developed from "tailoring governance approaches to locally salient traditions and by incorporating local leaders".
38	Preston (1983)	*APSR*	Legitimacy of an authority	Perception	Political legitimacy is conceived as legitimate when a political authority respects individual freedom and supports the interest of all citizens.
39	Dickson, Gordon and Huber (2015, p. 109)	*APSR*	Legitimacy of an authority	Process and Perception	Legitimacy of an authority is conceptualized as being "affected by how authorities are compensated, the transparency by which their decisions are observed, and an interaction between these."
40	Baldwin, Kao, and Lust (2025, p. 315)	*AJPS*	Leaders' domain legitimacy	Perception	"Belief that it is right or proper for the leader to demand citizens' engagement over certain activities"
41	Lü (2014)	*APSR*	Regime legitimacy	Process	Social policies facilitate government in maintaining the regime legitimacy.
42	Razi (1990)	*APSR*	Regime legitimacy	Process	Nationalism and religion as sources legitimacy to regime maintenance.
43	Lessing and Willis (2019)	*APSR*	Bureaucratic legitimacy	Process	This study conceptualized the rational bureaucratic legitimacy in criminal governance based on the features such as consignment-based trafficking. Operations, overwhelming non-violent punishments for debt-nonpayment and misconduct as a deliberate strategy for legitimacy building.
44	Dellmuth, Scholte, Tallberg, and Verhaegen (2022)	*APSR*	Organizational legitimacy	Perception	Citizen's perception of the legitimacy of international organizations as a belief that institution holds the appropriate authority, captured as a confidence in the organization.
45	Dietsch (2020)	*APSR*	Organizational legitimacy in policy making	Property	Credibility of the organization (central bank in context of research)
46	Sandven (2024)	*AJPS*	Legitimacy of border control	Property	States' right to refrain from interfering in international affairs, is the source of border control legitimacy
47	Kao, Lust, Shalaby and Weiss (2024, p. 496)	*APSR*	Legitimacy in gender composition (i.e., female representation)	Perception & Process	Citizens' perceptions regarding committee right decisions when committee is gender balanced (substantive legitimacy i.e., evaluation of decisions), and they report negative attitudes regarding decision-making processes when there is gender balanced (procedural legitimacy i.e., trust in the institution).
SOCIOLOGY					
48	Evans and Kay (2008)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy	Property	Refers to as receipt of an official recognition.
49	Joseph and Alex (1972)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy	Perception	Conformance to the standard definition of behavior and regulations.
50	Singh and Lumsden (1990)	ANNRS	Legitimacy	Property	No clear definition is provided. However, it is argued that by lowering selection pressures on organizations, external institutional support contributes to legitimacy in population dynamics, underpinned by institutional theory.

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S	Reference	Journal	Type	Dimension	Conceptualization
51	Lamont (2012)	ANNRS	Legitimacy	Perception	The term "legitimation" describes in terms of symbolic capital associated with recognition.
52	Lichtenstein (2022)	*AMJS*	Institutional legitimacy	Process	Legitimizing tactics are relational, discursive claims-making strategies that can be broadly divided into three categories, each of which corresponds to a distinct set of needs: discursive resonance, where advocates who are under a lot of pressure to conform create discursive proofs of equivalence between dominant state norms and non-compliant practices, in an effort to appeal to regulators; category conflation, which blurs the lines between compliant and noncompliant organizations; and compliance markers, which are selective conventional practices that signal conformity in order to establish basic institutional legitimacy, which in turn established deserving of resources.
53	Schoon (2022)	*AMSR*	Social legitimacy	Property	Legitimacy is conceptualized as an asset and expectations, assent, and conformity.
54	Brown (1932)	*AMJS*	Social legitimacy	Perception	Legitimacy is conceptualized in paternity setting whereby a marriage is implied as a socially acceptable setting for giving a childbirth.
55	Jenkins (1958)	*AMJS*	Social legitimacy	Perception	Children birth status as a property for being perceived as legitimate or illegitimate.
56	Koopmans and Olzak (2004)	*AMJS*	Social (public) legitimacy	Perception	The degree to which third actors' responses in the public domain generally affirm an actor's assertions more often than they contradict them is defined as public legitimacy. According to this definition, legitimacy can differ from resonance. While extremely illegitimate messages may have significant resonance (such as antisemitic violence in Germany for clear historical reasons), highly legitimate communications may have no resonance at all since they are uncontroversial.
57	Johnson, Dowd and Ridgeway (2006)	ANNRS	Legitimacy as a social process	Process	i) Legitimacy involves the construction of social reality. It is the interpretation of a social object as being aligned with cultural values, standards, and beliefs that are assumed to be shared both by members of a broader community (e.g., an organization or society) and by those in the immediate local context. Through this process of interpretation, what *is* becomes what is *right*, (ii) Legitimacy is essentially a collective process, even though it is mediated by individual perceptions and behaviors. The presumed existence of a social audience—those who embrace shared values, norms, and beliefs—makes it possible (and necessary) for an object to be seen as legitimate, iii) Legitimacy is dependent upon apparent consensus, which may not reflect actual agreement. It rests on the perception that most people in the local context accept the object as legitimate, (iv) Legitimation is a communal construction of social reality, comprising both a normative (prescriptive) dimension—framing the object as *right*—and a cognitive dimension—making the object appear *legitimate* to the actors involved.
58	De Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad (2013)	*AMJS*	Socio-political legitimacy	Process	Organization constructs socio-political legitimacy through the infrastructures that include civic organizations in immigrant communities and bureaucracy established by local governments to address specific groups.
59	Rao, Monin and Durand (2003)	*AMJS*	Socio-political legitimacy	Perception	Socio-political legitimacy of the activists is conceptualized as their recognized authority and embeddedness within field-level institutions.
60	Wang, Rao, and Soule (2019)	*AMSR*	Sociopolitical legitimacy	Property	Endorsement by legal authorities, government bodies, and other powerful organizations.
61	Billings and Scott (1994)	ANNRS	Legitimation of power	Perception	Mentions the political legitimacy to as legal validity, justifiability and expressed consent, and the study considers the role of religion in legitimization efforts.
62	Li and Hicks (2016)	AMSR	State legitimacy	Property	Legitimacy is not clearly defined but they argue that state legitimacy is secured by adapting global model of nation-state. It refers to the nation-state spread due to global diffusion.
63	Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001)	*AMSR*	State legitimacy	Process	State is a distinct and superior system of political control that derives much of its legitimacy from a lengthy history of authoritarian political leadership (particularly in Germany, Austria, Russia, and Japan) and a well-developed bureaucratic elite.
64	Santos (2022)	*AMSR*	State legitimacy	Perception	Social acceptance of state authority
65	Amengual and Bartley (2022)	*AMSR*	State legitimacy	Perception	Credibility of states
66	Bandelj (2009)	*AMSR*	State legitimacy	Process	Substantive legitimacy is conceptualized as process by which a state's commits to attracting foreign direct investment, reflected in informal norms and economic interactions. Formal legitimacy refers to the state's efforts in institutionalizing the globalization, in formal free market policies, as a normatively desirable development strategy.
67	Zhao (2000)	*AMJS*	State legitimacy	Perception	Perception regarding state legitimacy in terms of how state power is justified, and it is gauged on three aspects: legal electoral, ideological, and performance.
68	Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan (2018)	*AMSR*	Political system legitimacy crisis	Property	The members of at least one political constituency will be influenced to view a blatant transgressor of accepted standards as a real advocate for their interests if the political system is experiencing a "crisis of legitimacy" as pointed by Lipset, 1959.
69	Jong-Sung and Khagram (2005)	*AMSR*	Illegitimacy of political institutions	Perception	The study conceptualizes legitimacy as the perceived fairness and moral authority of political institutions and rules. It argues that income

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Table 2 (*continued*)

S	Reference	Journal	Type	Dimension	Conceptualization
					inequality undermines legitimacy by fostering public beliefs that institutions serve elite interests rather than the broader population. This erosion of legitimacy contributes to the normalization and tolerance of corrupt behaviour.
70	Levine (2016)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of elected politician	Process	Captured as donors or officials reports that they speak for the neighborhood; rely upon by public servants to serve as a conduit for the community; obtain funding from private sources to act as representatives in the neighborhood; and use the representative position to get more resources
71	Friedman and Reeves (2020)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of elite	Process	Defined as how elites use their public recreations to convey their social standing or, in this instance, their moral authority
72	Rios, Prieto and Ibarra (2020, pp. 59–60)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy policing	Process	"Legitimacy policing is a system of action in which officers combine punitive and courtesy strategies to reach a desired interactional outcome"
73	Stinchcombe (1997)	ANNRS	Legitimacy of law market	Property	Legitimacy in the system of market competition law and its connection to the legitimacy of having the ability to outperform rivals as a moral and legal claim to the earnings of that superiority.
74	Carlson (2019)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy in violence	Property and Process	Legitimate violence refers to those capacities for and deployments of physical coercion that can be justified by recourse to law, justice, and authority. This includes, for example, access to the means of violence (such as guns as property) as well as actual instances (process) of violence (such as particular acts of gun use)
75	Cheng (2022)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy of police	Process	Community oriented actions for obtaining positive perception that actions are desirable.
76	Stryker (1994, p. 873)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy of a legal process	Process	"The power of positive outcome to enhance the binding character of rules"
77	Ferguson (2021)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of ministry of justice	Perception	Legitimacy is not clearly defined; however, it is argued that the legitimacy perception comes from external environment and culture within which judge and prosecutors are embedded.
78	Cattani, Ferriani and Allison (2014, p. 9)	*AMSR*	Cultural legitimacy	Perception	"Cultural legitimacy is the use of aesthetic judgements to assign value to cultural producers and their products". This involves public acclaim, recognition from peers, and critical evaluation.
79	Allen and Parsons (2006, pp. 810–811)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of cultural consecration project	Process	"Legitimacy of cultural consecration project depends upon the fulfillment of four conditions. The first condition entails the cultural authority of the organization awarding the honor. The second condition that appears to be required of any successful consecration project involves the rigorous procedures used to select the recipients of an honor. The third condition that seems to be required of a successful consecration project concerns the relative selectivity of the award such that only a very small proportion of the potential recipients actually receive the honor. The fourth and most crucial condition that seems to be essential for any successful consecration project involves the identification of objective differences between the individuals and objects that are consecrated and those that are not."
80	Ryo (2013, p. 577)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of authority	Perception	"Perceived obligation to obey a rule or a system of social order".
81	Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek, and Norman (1998, p. 379)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy and de-legitimacy of Power	Process	The paper discuss that the power and prestige order once legitimated can also be delegitimated. The process of legitimacy is "carried through by the contingent reactions of others who can provide consensual validation."
82	Ridgeway and Berger (1986, p. 606)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of power	Process	Legitimation is a collective and structural process by which shared performance expectations are created and a power and prestige order is established.
83	Kraatz and Zajac (1996, p. 814)	*AMSR*	Illegitimacy of organization	Property	Organizations strive for legitimacy, "leading to adopt uniform and institutionalized structures and practices to conform to the mandate in institutional environment". Contrary to this, illegitimacy as a property implies fundamentally inconsistent with institutionalized values, viewed as a threat to perpetuation of norms, and denounced by actors in institutional environment.
84	C. M. Smith (2020, p. 895)	*AMSR*	Organizational legitimacy	Process	Organizations that "adapt to shifts in markets, competition, regulations, and enforcements".
85	Schneiberg and Bartley (2001)	*AMJS*	Organization Legitimacy crisis	Perception	Legitimacy crises brought on by beliefs that businesses transgress rules of order give way to calls for regulations.
86	Carruthers and Espeland (1991)	*AMJS*	Organization legitimacy	Property	Justness and appreciation of a business.
87	Podolny and Page (1998)	ANNRS	Legitimacy (organization)	Property	Defines legitimacy as a factor that enhances status.
88	Djelic and Quack (2018)	ANNRS	Legitimacy (organization)	Process	Contend that the dynamics of legitimacy are intricate empirical phenomena that vary greatly amongst institutional contexts. Most significantly, those dynamics change over time as audiences contest those legitimacy claims and therefore trigger new strategic reactions, and as rule-setting actors devise ways to acquire, preserve, and restore legitimacy.
89	C. M. Smith and Papachristos (2016)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of organizational network sphere	Perception	The legitimate network sphere includes associations in businesses, formal organizations, politics, and unions— such that none of these ties are perceived as illicit.
90	Bechky (2003)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy of group work	Perception	Credibility of work.
91	Schein and Ott (1962)	*AMJS*	Managerial legitimacy	Perception	Perceived as right for the manager to influence subordinate.

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Table 2 (*continued*)

S	Reference	Journal	Type	Dimension	Conceptualization
92	Lucas (2003)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of leadership	Process	Legitimizing female leadership process implies fostering the perception that successful organizations use women in senior roles could shift the structural background away from favoring men.
93	Molm (1986)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy of power structure	Property	A power structure considered legitimate when it has a property that all members of the structure agree that it is correct and proper; and when there are common expectations that everyone would act in a way that supports the system.
94	Stolte (1983)	*AMSR*	Legitimacy of structure	Perception	Legitimation of structure implies being perceived as fair and right.
95	Torfason and Ingram (2010)	*AMSR*	Democratic and information legitimacy	Perception	Intergovernmental organizations IGOs, do not transmit information verbatim between their member states; rather, they are successful mediators because of how they interpret the information. In the international community of IGOs, information that is viewed as illegitimate will be interpreted and disseminated negatively or not at all, whereas information that is viewed as legitimate is interpreted to increase the possibility that member states will view it favorably. This implies democracy's legitimacy to be taken in account in global society to comprehend how it spreads throughout the IGO network.
96	Skarpelis (2023)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy of a regime	Process	The state's and its cultural agents' capacity to address the issue of racial mismatch is the process which the legitimacy of the national socialist rule is determined.
97	Kelley and Evans (1993)	*AMJS*	Legitimacy of inequality	Perception	Public beliefs about the of income inequality based on moral norms
98	Lamont (1987)	*AMJS*	Intellectual legitimacy	Process	Process of getting public recognition of work involves intellectual, cultural, institutional and social conditions.
99	Gauchat (2023)	ANNRS	Legitimacy of science	Property	Does not define specifically but implies that fragility or crisis of science's legitimacy depends on understanding of cultural and institutional norms.
100	Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum (2008)	ANNRS	Knowledge legitimacy	Perception	Formal recognition of knowledge.
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS/MANAGEMENT					
101	Aldrich and Fiol (1994, p. 648)	AMR	Socio-political legitimacy	Property	Extent to which socio-political stakeholders accept a venture as appropriate and right, given existing norms and laws.
102	Hadjikhani et al. (2019)	MIR	Socio-political legitimacy	Property	Accumulation of recognition in both the business and non-business markets
103	Chung and Luo (2013)	SMJ	Socio-political legitimacy	Perception	Perceived credibility by the actors.
104	Zhang et al. (2018)	JWB	Socio-political legitimacy	Process	Process in acquiring the judgement of stakeholders

COMMON GROUNDS AND DISTINCT FEATURES

- It is a contested, fluid concept that is context dependent and conceptualized differently in different disciplines
- Ambiguity of legitimacy arises due to its interdisciplinary nature.
- A common ground across fields is the consideration of legitimacy from an institutional perspective (some from a regulatory perspective and others from a cultural and normative perspective).
- All fields focus on its three dimensions: property, perception, and process.
- Disciplinary emphasis varies by level of analysis — for example, political science often frames legitimacy at the system or regime level, while sociology and organizational theory focus on legitimacy at the organizational, group, or social interaction level. International business frequently centers on firm-level legitimacy and its embeddedness in institutional environments.
- The dynamic between internal and external legitimacy is implicit across fields, with some disciplines focusing on legitimacy granted by formal institutions (e.g., courts, states), while others emphasize legitimacy emerging from public perception or social validation (e.g., stakeholders, communities, audiences).
- Legitimacy is not static; it can shift over time due to changes in social, political, or economic contexts. This dynamic nature is reflected differently across disciplines, with some emphasizing historical legitimacy (e.g., political science) and others focusing on ongoing negotiations (e.g., international business, organizational theory).
- Legitimacy can be framed either from a normative perspective (e.g., cultural norms in sociology) or a pragmatic perspective (e.g., strategic alignment in international business). These differing orientations influence how legitimacy is constructed and maintained in each discipline

Note: *Please see the appendix-II for the references of the cited studies in the above table from political science, sociology, and IB/Management journals.*

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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