

Mapping Legitimacy Research in Business and Management: A CiteSpace-Based Bibliometric Review of Conceptual Diffusion and Thematic Evolution

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Abstract: This study examines the diffusion and thematic evolution of legitimacy research in business and management. Based on 6,034 records from the Web of Science Core Collection covering 1997-2025, the paper uses descriptive statistics, co-citation analysis, keyword clustering, burst detection, and thematic evolution mapping to identify the field's publication patterns, knowledge structure, and research frontiers. The findings show that legitimacy has expanded from its institutional-theory foundations into entrepreneurship, CSR, sustainability reporting, ESG, governance accountability, international business, and digital platform studies. Rather than replacing earlier traditions, newer themes reconnect with classic questions of organizational recognition, audience judgment, disclosure, responsibility, and resource mobilization. The review further suggests that CSR, carbon disclosure, ESG performance, green innovation, artificial intelligence, and gender diversity have become active frontier topics. The paper argues that future research should specify the type of legitimacy being studied, the audiences making legitimacy judgments, and the evidence through which legitimacy is acquired, maintained, challenged, repaired, or lost.

Keywords: Legitimacy; Bibliometric Analysis; CiteSpace; Business and Management; Conceptual Diffusion; Thematic Evolution

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1. Introduction

Legitimacy is a key concept in institutional theory, but its application has gradually expanded beyond the scope of early institutionalist research. Early institutionalist studies used this concept to explain that an organization's survival depends not only on efficiency but also on whether it is perceived as legitimate, acceptable, and meaningful within a specific social order^[1-4]. This perspective remains relevant today, though the contexts in which legitimacy plays a role have become more complex. Today, firms must not only secure the approval of regulators and investors but also respond to the expectations of a diverse array of stakeholders, including consumers, communities, the media, rating agencies, platform users, and activist groups. Consequently, legitimacy is no longer merely a theoretical term; it has become a practical prerequisite for organizational survival, market access, and resource mobilization.

The term "legitimacy" now carries too many meanings simultaneously. In some studies, legitimacy refers to compliance with institutional rules; in others, it is almost equated with stakeholder endorsement, moral acceptance, public trust, reputation, or

credibility. While these concepts clearly overlap, the widespread dissemination and use of the concept of legitimacy may also cause it to lose its analytical power. This paper takes this critical point as its starting point: legitimacy is influential precisely because it bridges numerous discussions within management studies; however, it is this very versatility that may undermine the precision it originally possessed as an analytical concept^[13–19]. This characteristic is evident across multiple fields. Entrepreneurship research employs legitimacy to explain how startups are perceived by investors and customers; corporate social responsibility and sustainability research utilize legitimacy to analyze information disclosure, ESG ratings, and greenwashing. International business researchers leverage legitimacy to examine host country acceptance and institutional complexity. While they share the same conceptual vocabulary, they often address different questions.

Existing conceptual reviews have clarified many foundational issues in the field. They explain how organizations acquire, maintain, or lose legitimacy, and they clarify why legitimacy differs from reputation, status, and trust^[13–15]. However, such reviews do not readily capture the overall structure of the field as it has emerged over the past three decades at the level of journals, citations, and keywords. For this reason, bibliometric maps hold significant value. Maps and networks do not automatically provide explanations, but they can reveal where the research community congregates, where it converges, and where the concept of legitimacy is being continually expanded.

Therefore, this paper examines research related to legitimacy in the fields of business and management from 1997 to 2025. The paper addresses three central questions: First, which knowledge traditions constitute the primary organizational foundations of the field; second, how clusters of major research themes and keywords have evolved; and third, how emerging fields such as corporate social responsibility, ESG, sustainability reporting, and governance accountability have reshaped the use of the concept of legitimacy. The aim of this paper is to reveal how the concept of legitimacy has diffused and been reconfigured, and to identify areas where future research requires greater theoretical awareness and conceptual rigor^[29–34].

2. Research Overview and Theoretical Background

2.1 The Institutional Context of the Concept of Legitimacy

Institutional theory provides a key framework for understanding legitimacy. Meyer and Rowan note that an organization's formal structure is not merely intended to enhance efficiency; it sometimes functions as a socially accepted "rationalization myth"^[1]. DiMaggio and Powell further explain why organizations within the same institutional field gradually become similar, a process often driven by coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures^[2]. Scott, in turn, summarizes expectations within the institutional environment as three pillars: regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive^[3]. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that legitimacy is not merely a matter of organizational efficiency; it also concerns whether an organization conforms to institutional rules, whether it can be understood by the outside world, and whether it can be regarded as a self-evident entity. Precisely for this reason, legitimacy can, to a certain extent, reduce an organization's uncertainty and vulnerability when facing the external environment^[5].

This perspective was later further developed in entrepreneurship research. For startups, legitimacy is not an abstract theoretical label, but rather a prerequisite for being taken seriously by the outside world. Only when investors, customers, and partners are willing to view a startup as a genuine, credible, and trustworthy organization can it more easily secure resources and development opportunities^[9–12]. Building on this, Suchman further emphasized organizational agency^[4]. Legitimacy is not merely a result bestowed upon an organization by the external environment; organizations also actively seek, maintain, and repair their legitimacy. His distinction between instrumental, moral, and cognitive legitimacy remains explanatory to this day. Different audiences focus on different issues: some are concerned with whether the organization serves their own interests, others with whether the organization is morally acceptable, and still others with whether the organization is sufficiently clear, familiar, and easy to understand.

Research on strategic legitimation, however, examines the issue of legitimacy within more uncertain contexts. Ashforth and Gibbs note that when organizations defend their legitimacy too overtly, it may actually provoke external skepticism^[6]. Elsbach demonstrates how organizations respond to controversies through explanatory statements^[7]. Oliver discusses the various reactions organizations exhibit when facing institutional pressures, ranging from compliance to manipulation^[8]. These studies also explain why the concept of legitimacy frequently appears in research on corporate social responsibility

communication, sustainability reporting, crisis response, public relations, and non-market strategies.

2.2 The Social Judgment Perspective on Legitimacy

Another line of research views legitimacy as a social judgment. In other words, legitimacy is not stored within an organization like an asset, but is bestowed upon the organization by external evaluators based on certain criteria^[16–18]. These criteria may be cognitive, moral, instrumental, or relational. This perspective is significant because organizations in the real world rarely face only a single audience. Businesses, startups, multinational corporations, and digital platforms often simultaneously engage with investors, customers, regulators, the media, communities, and other stakeholders, and the judgment criteria of these actors are not always consistent.

Bitektine's distinction between legitimacy, reputation, and status offers valuable insights into this issue^[16]. Legitimacy primarily concerns whether an organization is acceptable within a given social system; reputation involves comparative external evaluations of an organization's quality or performance; and status emphasizes an organization's relative position within a relational structure. Trust concerns external expectations regarding an organization's reliability or good faith, whereas credibility concerns whether a particular claim is believable. Although these concepts are frequently intertwined in empirical research, they cannot be simply equated. Otherwise, legitimacy risks being generalized into a catch-all term for nearly all positive evaluations^[19].

In contemporary management research, audience diversity has become an unavoidable context for studies on legitimacy. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ESG research involve investors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media, rating agencies, and regulators; international business research focuses on host-country governments and local communities; entrepreneurship research emphasizes investors, customers, and market intermediaries; and digital platform research further incorporates users, complementary parties, and algorithmic evaluators into the discussion. From this perspective, legitimacy is no longer a single judgment but rather a set of evaluations formed by different stakeholders based on their distinct concerns.

2.3 Research Gaps

The concept of legitimacy has been widely applied in research fields such as corporate social responsibility, environmental disclosure, sustainability reporting, and ESG. In accounting and disclosure research, scholars often use legitimacy to explain why firms disclose social and environmental information under external pressure^[20–22, 26–28]. However, a persistent question remains: do these disclosures truly reflect the firm's genuine commitment to responsibility, or are they primarily used to maintain external acceptance of the firm? Similar discussions exist in international business research. When multinational enterprises enter different institutional environments, they face evaluation standards that are not entirely consistent, making them more susceptible to legitimacy pressures and adaptation issues^[23–25].

Research on entrepreneurship and market categories has shifted the discussion in another direction. Before gaining recognition, startups and emerging market categories must first make themselves “understandable” to the outside world. Storytelling, identity statements, product prototypes, alliances, certifications, and category labels can all serve as signals of cognitive and instrumental legitimacy^[9–12]. Digital organizations further complicate this issue. They must not only earn the trust of investors and users but also address the concerns of regulators and the public regarding privacy, fairness, transparency, and accountability^[38–40]. These developments underscore the need for a bibliometric review to examine the diffusion of legitimacy research across different fields and how various research themes interconnect and reconfigure.

3. Data Sources and Research Methods

3.1 Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature data in this study were obtained from the Web of Science Core Collection. This database was selected primarily because it provides relatively comprehensive and standardized bibliographic information and citation data, thereby meeting the requirements of bibliometric research, such as citation analysis, co-citation analysis, and keyword analysis^[29,30]. Since this study focuses on research on legitimacy in the fields of business and management, the search scope was limited to journals indexed in SSCI and classified under the Business, Business Finance, and Management categories.

Regarding the selection of search terms, this study did not use narrow expressions such as “organizational legitimacy,”

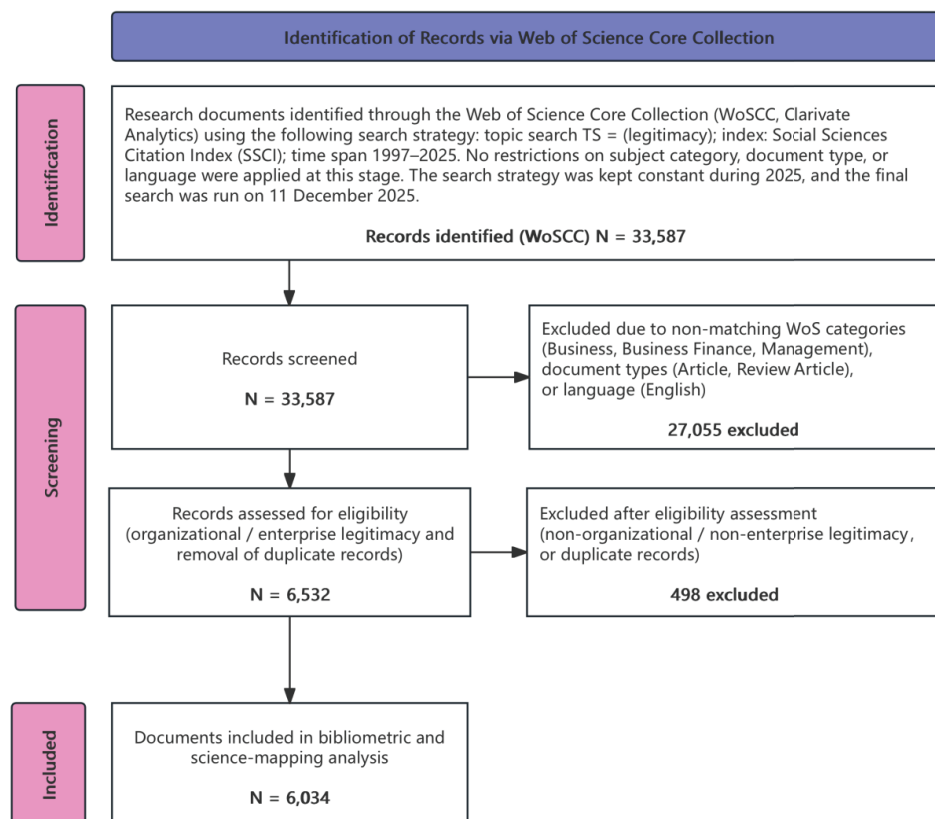
but instead employed a broader subject search formula: $TS = (\text{legitimacy})$. This study does not merely aim to examine research on organizational legitimacy in the narrow sense, but rather seeks to observe how the concept of legitimacy is used, disseminated, and reconfigured within business and management research. If narrower search terms had been used from the outset, the dataset might have been more concentrated, but it would also have been prone to omitting literature from other fields that utilize the concept of legitimacy. Of course, a broad search also carries a risk: not all articles included in the dataset treat legitimacy as a core theoretical concept. Some articles may use legitimacy merely as a supporting concept. Given this, this paper exercises caution in subsequent screening and interpretation of results, refraining from interpreting the dataset as a comprehensive collection of “organizational legitimacy research” but rather viewing it as a literature foundation for observing the diffusion of the legitimacy concept and the evolution of the topic.

The search period for this study spans from 1997 to 2025, with the final data extraction date set as December 11, 2025. The initial search yielded a total of 33,587 records. Subsequently, the study applied filters based on index type, disciplinary category, document type, and language, limiting the data to English-language SSCI journal articles and review papers. On this basis, duplicate records were further removed, and literature primarily unrelated to discussions of legitimacy within the business and management research context was excluded. Ultimately, the study yielded 6,034 valid literature records. It should be noted that some foundational literature published prior to 1997—such as studies by Meyer and Rowan, DiMaggio and Powell, Ashforth and Gibbs, Elsbach, and Suchman—were not included in the dataset as source documents but were nonetheless used as important references for theoretical interpretation in this study^[1,2,4,6,7].

3.2 Literature Screening and Preprocessing

The literature screening process consisted of four main steps. First, records with the term “legitimacy” in the subject field were identified in Web of Science. Second, database filters were applied to retain literature within the business and management categories. Third, a manual review was conducted based on titles, abstracts, keywords, and source information to exclude literature primarily discussing political legitimacy, constitutional legitimacy, or legal legitimacy. Fourth, the full records and cited references of the remaining literature were exported for subsequent bibliometric analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the literature retrieval and screening process in this study.

Figure 1. Literature search and screening process



3.3 Analytical Procedures

This study combines descriptive statistics with scientific knowledge graph analysis. Descriptive statistics are primarily used to present the annual publication volume, document types, journal distribution, and basic characteristics of the datasets. Co-citation analysis is used to identify knowledge connections between documents; specifically, when a subsequent study cites two documents simultaneously, a co-citation relationship is formed between those two documents^[33]. Keyword co-occurrence and clustering analysis are used to observe the concentration of research topics, while sudden emergence detection is employed to identify terms or references that have rapidly gained attention during specific periods^[32].

This study uses CiteSpace to generate co-citation networks, keyword maps, clustering results, timeline charts, and burst detection results^[32]. Descriptive charts were primarily compiled using Excel. To analyze the evolution of research themes, the study period is divided into four phases: 1997–2004, 2005–2012, 2013–2019, and 2020–2025. This division is not a strict historical periodization but rather an analytical framework established based on the development of the research. It is primarily used to observe the early diffusion of legitimacy research, its expansion into corporate social responsibility and entrepreneurship studies, its consolidation across different fields of management, and its recent reconfiguration in relation to themes such as ESG, sustainability, governance, and platforms.

The interpretation of the graph results is primarily based on the theoretical framework proposed in Section 2. Growth in the number of publications reflects the expansion of the field; co-citation patterns help elucidate the connections between research traditions such as institutional theory, strategic legitimation, social judgment, entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability. Keyword clustering reflects shifts in research focus rather than direct changes in the theories themselves. Therefore, this paper does not treat bibliometric results as automatically generated conclusions but rather as a basis for further interpreting the evolution of legitimacy research^[29, 30, 34].

Caution is also required when using citation metrics. Citation frequency and co-citation networks can help identify highly visible literature and knowledge proximity, but they do not directly represent theoretical quality^[35, 36]. A frequently cited work may be so because it proposes a particular method, because its research context is relatively typical, or because it employs conceptual terminology that is easily adopted by other studies. Consequently, while this paper uses citation evidence as a starting point for analysis, it returns to the theory of legitimacy itself when interpreting the theoretical significance of these patterns.

4. Overview of Research on Legitimacy

4.1 Publication Patterns and Journal Distribution

The final dataset comprises 6,034 legitimacy-related publications in the fields of business and management from 1997 to 2025, including 5,803 research articles and 231 review articles. The dataset involves 11,273 authors, 2,703 institutions, 365 journals, and 47 Web of Science subject categories. The number of subject categories exceeds the number of search categories because many journals are classified under multiple categories simultaneously. This distribution demonstrates that the concept of legitimacy is no longer confined to a single discipline.

Table 1. Summary statistics of the dataset, 1997-2025

Category	Publication	Articles	Review Articles	Authors	Institutions	Journals	Subject categories
Amount	6034	5803	231	11273	2703	365	47

Figure 2 illustrates a process that began slowly but then accelerated significantly. Between 1997 and 2007, the annual number of publications was relatively low, rising from a small number of papers in the late 1990s to 63 in 2007. The first significant turning point occurred after 2008, when the annual output reached 116 papers and continued to rise, albeit with some fluctuations. The second shift occurred around 2018–2019, with output increasing from 327 to 411 papers. By 2024 and 2025, annual output is projected to reach 551 and 560 papers, respectively.

Figure 2. Annual publication output of legitimacy-related research in business and management, 1997-2025

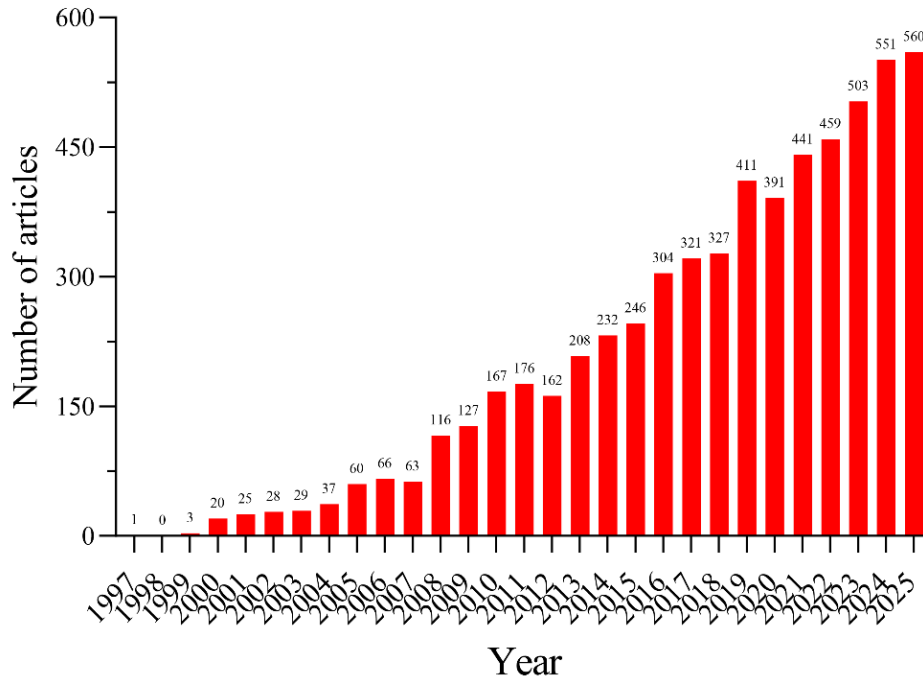
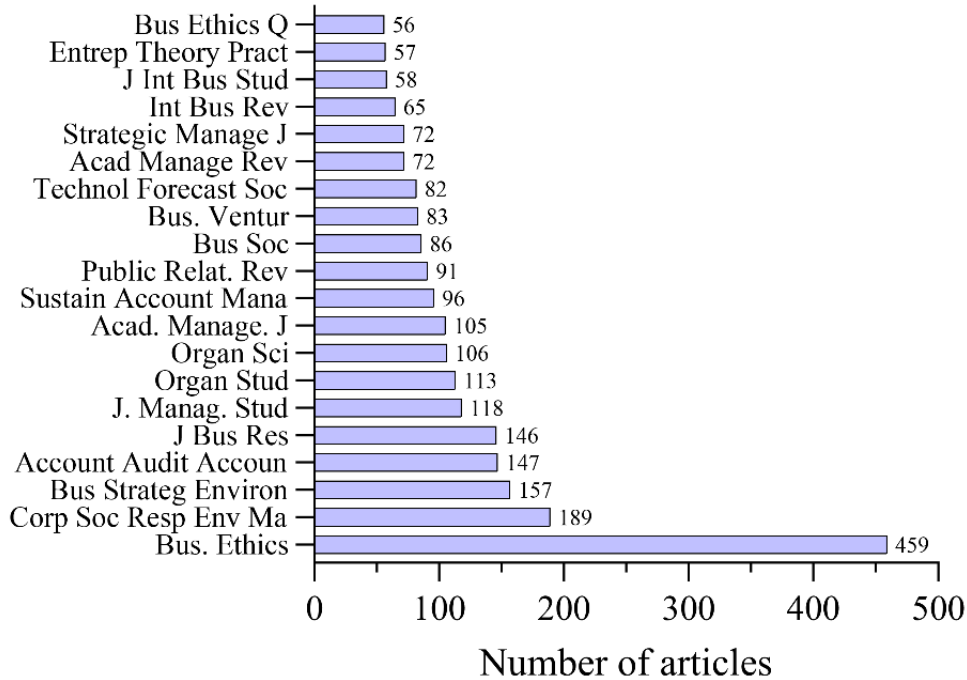


Figure 3 shows the journal distribution. Journal of Business Ethics is the most prominent outlet, with 459 related publications, followed by Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management with 189 publications and Business Strategy and the Environment with 157 publications. This distribution is revealing.

Figure 3. Top journals publishing legitimacy-related research in business and management



4.2 Co-Citation Structure and Important Publications

This paper employs co-citation analysis to examine the knowledge structure of the selected literature. Figure 4 shows that the network comprises 1,793 nodes and 7,625 links, with a network density of 0.0049. The largest connected component contains 1,740 nodes, accounting for 97% of all nodes. This indicates that although the co-citation network of legitimacy research is relatively dispersed, most of the literature remains within the same knowledge-linked structure and does not constitute isolated research segments.

Looking at representative nodes in the figure, Scott's research demonstrates the enduring influence of institutional theory on legitimacy studies, suggesting that regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional frameworks remain the foundation for understanding legitimacy. Freeman's stakeholder theory indicates that legitimacy research has increasingly focused on the relationship between organizations and external actors. Works by Bitektine, Suddaby, and Deephouse occupy prominent positions in the network, reflecting that social judgments, audience evaluations, and conceptual distinctions regarding organizational legitimacy have become key sources of knowledge in the field. Scherer's research links legitimacy to sustainable development and corporate responsibility, while studies by Tauscher et al. indicate that the concept of legitimacy is extending into new contexts such as digital markets and startups. Overall, Figure 4 does not depict old theories being replaced by new themes, but rather the ongoing connections and reconfigurations among different research traditions.

Figure 4. Co-citation network of legitimacy-related research within the selected dataset

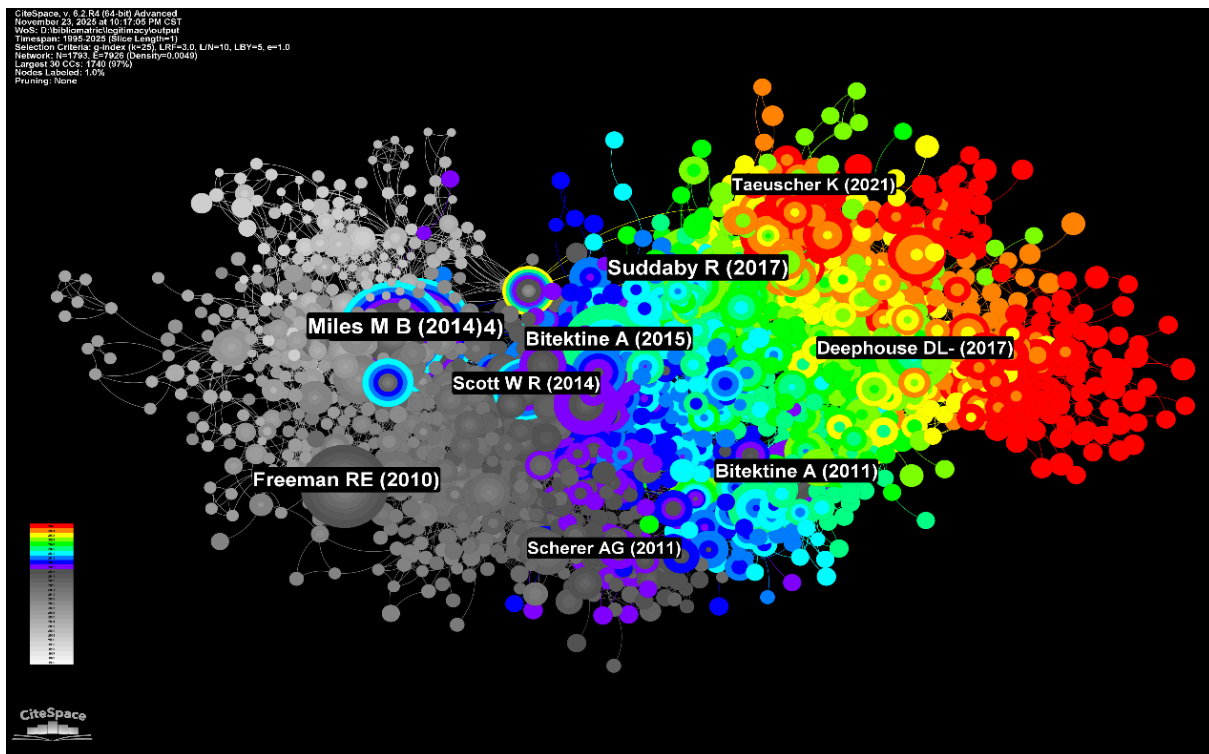


Table 2. Leading publications within the selected dataset (top 10 by local citation score)

No.	Publication	Journal	LCS	GCS
64	Beyond survival: Achieving new venture growth by building legitimacy	Academy of Management Review	534	1498
40	Cultural entrepreneurship: Stories, legitimacy, and the acquisition of resources	Strategic Management Journal	401	1383
460	How new market categories emerge: Temporal dynamics of legitimacy, identity, and entrepreneurship	Administrative Science Quarterly	304	921
1285	Toward a theory of social judgments of organizations	Academy of Management Review	249	808
2892	The macro and the micro of legitimacy	Academy of Management Review	236	609
3280	Legitimacy	Academy of Management Annals	206	510
205	Organizational legitimacy under conditions of complexity	Academy of Management Review	194	1161
802	Corporate legitimacy as deliberation	Journal of Business Ethics	171	764
1145	Managing legitimacy in complex and heterogeneous environments	Journal of Management Studies	157	575
2310	Legitimacy in organizational institutionalism	SAGE Handbook	142	760

Table 2 presents the publications with relatively high citation frequency in the selected dataset. In terms of research focus, these studies are distributed across different directions, including cultural entrepreneurship, market-category formation, social judgment, institutional complexity and corporate legitimacy.

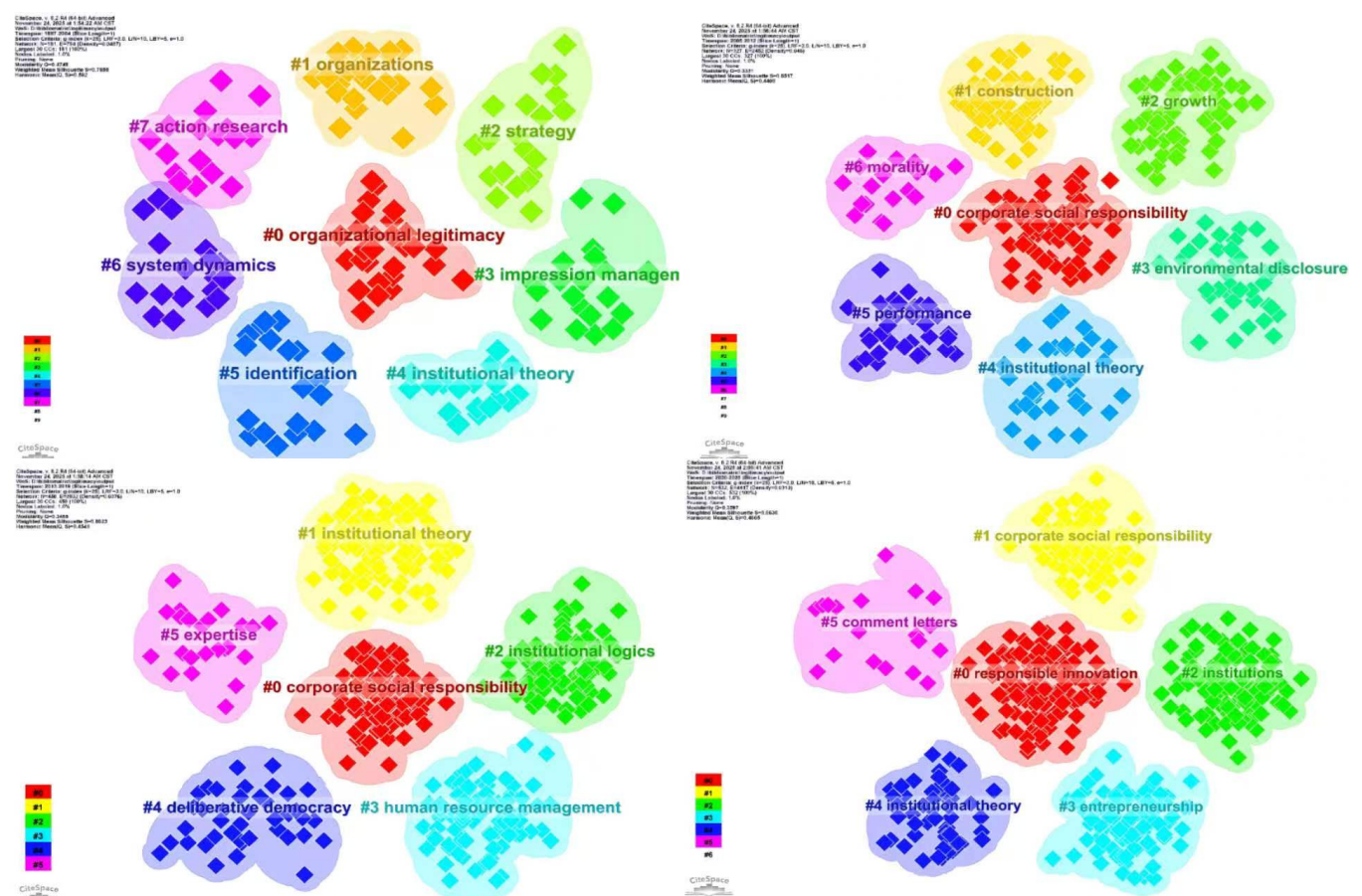
5. Research Hotspots and Thematic Evolution

5.1 Keyword Clustering and Research Hotspots

Figure 5 presents the results of keyword clustering across four phases from 1997 to 2025. Overall, the evolution of themes in legitimacy research shows a trend of expanding from institutional foundations to accountable governance and innovative contexts. The early stages primarily revolved around clusters such as “organizational legitimacy,” “institutional theory,” “strategy,” and “impression management,” indicating that research focused on how organizations obtain institutional recognition, manage their public image, and ensure their survival.

As research progressed, themes such as “corporate social responsibility,” “environmental disclosure,” “performance,” “growth,” and “morality” gradually came to the fore, suggesting that the concept of legitimacy began to be increasingly applied to explain the relationships among corporate social responsibility, environmental disclosure, and organizational performance. In the most recent phase, clusters such as “responsible innovation,” “institutions,” “entrepreneurship,” and “comment letters” have become more prominent, indicating that legitimacy research is further expanding into new contexts such as innovation governance, entrepreneurial activities, and regulatory communication. Overall, Figure 5 demonstrates that institutional theory remains a crucial foundation for legitimacy research, but its application has clearly expanded into areas such as CSR, sustainability, entrepreneurship, and innovation governance.

Figure 5. Keyword clusters across four analytical periods, 1997-2025



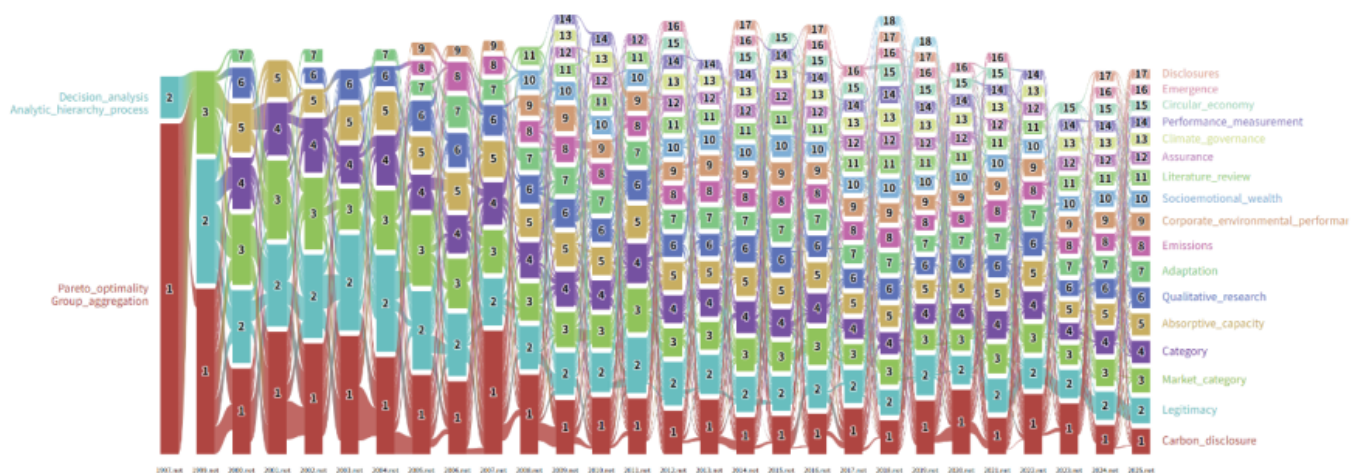
5.2 Thematic Reorganization and Alluvial Analysis

Figure 6 illustrates the annual shifts in research themes related to legitimacy between 1997 and 2025. Overall, early themes were primarily concentrated on methodological issues such as decision analysis, the analytic hierarchy process, Pareto

optimality, and group aggregation, indicating that early research in this area still contained a significant amount of content related to decision analysis and methodological applications. Subsequently, themes such as “legitimacy,” “market category,” “category,” “qualitative research,” and “adaptation” gradually stabilized, indicating that legitimacy research began to shift more toward the contexts of organizational studies, market categories, and qualitative research.

From the mid-to-late period onward, the flow of themes shifted noticeably toward environmental disclosure and sustainable governance. “Carbon disclosure” formed a relatively consistent backbone in the figure, while themes such as “emissions,” “corporate environmental performance,” “assurance,” “climate governance,” “circular economy,” and “disclosures” also appeared frequently in the later stages. This suggests that the concept of legitimacy has not departed from the core issues of “recognition” and “acceptance” discussed in the early stages, but has instead been reapplied to explain how firms respond to external evaluations through carbon disclosure, environmental performance, sustainability reporting, and governance practices. Thus, Figure 6 does not depict a simple replacement of themes, but rather the continuous migration and reorganization of the concept of legitimacy across different management issues.

Figure 6. Alluvial diagram of thematic evolution in legitimacy-related research, 1997-2025



5.3 Research Trends and Frontier Directions

Figure 7 presents the keywords with the strongest citation bursts in legitimacy-related research from 1997 to 2025. In the early stage, burst terms such as model, discourse, isomorphism, evolution and diffusion were prominent. Among them, isomorphism shows the strongest burst strength, reaching 21.59, which indicates that institutional isomorphism was one of the most visible frontier topics in the earlier development of legitimacy research. The relatively long burst periods of discourse, evolution and diffusion also suggest that early studies were concerned not only with institutional conformity, but also with how legitimacy was constructed through discourse, change and diffusion.

In the middle and later stages, the burst keywords gradually shifted to stakeholder theory, citizenship, networks, social construction, multinational corporations and activism. This reflects a broader move from institutional conformity toward stakeholder relations, social construction, international business and social action. More recent burst terms show a stronger connection with ESG, green innovation and data-driven research. Panel data has a burst strength of 10.61, ESG performance 8.98, artificial intelligence 7.34, green innovation 11.42 and gender diversity 9.10, and these topics remain active until 2025. Overall, Figure 7 suggests that the frontier of legitimacy research has expanded from institutional isomorphism and discourse-based studies to carbon disclosure, ESG evaluation, artificial intelligence, institutional investors, green innovation and gender diversity, with increasing attention to quantitative measurement and empirical testing.

Figure 7. Top keyword bursts in legitimacy-related research



6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Continuity

Based on the findings discussed above, the expansion of legitimacy research is not a process in which old theories are replaced by new themes. Within the co-citation network, institutional theory, stakeholder theory, social judgment research,

and entrepreneurship research collectively form the knowledge foundation of this field. Keyword clustering and emerging terms also indicate that while legitimacy research has expanded into new topics such as CSR, environmental disclosure, ESG, green innovation, and digital platforms, its core issues remain unchanged. Organizations still need to be understood, recognized, and accepted by their external environment; however, this recognition no longer comes solely from traditional institutional settings but increasingly from diverse stakeholders such as investors, regulators, the media, consumers, communities, and platform users.

This also demonstrates that the value of the legitimacy concept lies in its strong interpretive flexibility. It can be used to explain how startups secure resources and market recognition, as well as to analyze how firms address external scrutiny through social responsibility disclosures, environmental reporting, and governance practices. However, the broader the concept is applied, the more easily its boundaries become blurred. If legitimacy is simply equated with reputation, trust, performance, credibility, or positive evaluations in a general sense, it loses its original analytical power^[13–19]. Therefore, future research still needs to clarify more explicitly which type of legitimacy is being discussed, who makes the judgment, and what the basis for that judgment is.

6.2 Disclosure and Audience

The results of this paper indicate that CSR, environmental disclosure, carbon disclosure, ESG performance, and sustainability reporting have become highly active research areas within the field of legitimacy studies. In Figures 5 and 6, themes such as corporate social responsibility, environmental disclosure, carbon disclosure, climate governance, and sustainable governance have continued to gain prominence in the mid-to-late stages; in Figure 7, keywords such as carbon disclosure, ESG performance, green innovation, and ESG disclosure remain active through 2025. This indicates that legitimacy research is clearly moving toward issues of responsible governance and sustainable development.

These issues are significant because they vividly illustrate the differences in audiences within legitimacy assessments. When companies disclose social and environmental information, they may be presenting actual performance, or they may be responding to criticism, maintaining their image, or seeking social acceptance^[20–22, 41–44]. The same disclosure may be evaluated differently by investors, regulators, the media, consumers, and activists. Investors may prioritize ESG ratings, activists may question whether companies are engaging in greenwashing, while regulators may focus on whether the disclosed information is sufficient and verifiable^[48–55]. Therefore, legitimacy is not necessarily gained or lost as a unified whole; it may be differentiated across different audiences. Future research that merely asks whether a company “possesses legitimacy” would be overly general; more meaningful questions include who is making the judgment, on what basis, and how these judgments influence organizational behavior.

6.3 Directions for Future Research

Future research can proceed in three directions. First, legitimacy must be examined within a temporal process. It is not something that is acquired once and remains static; rather, it is constructed, eroded, repaired, or reinterpreted through events, controversies, and ongoing interactions. Changes in legitimacy are often particularly complex when judgments by investors, regulators, the media, communities, and users diverge. Longitudinal case studies, process tracking, and event studies can better capture these changes^[17, 18, 37].

Second, the measurement of legitimacy requires greater caution. Media tone, certifications, awards, the volume of disclosures, ESG ratings, surveys, and investment outcomes can all serve as indicators for observing legitimacy, but they do not all point to the same thing. Certifications may be closer to regulatory or normative legitimacy, media evaluations may reflect public recognition, while investment outcomes may more closely reflect instrumental legitimacy. Theoretically discussing one form of legitimacy while empirically measuring another phenomenon weakens the explanatory power of research conclusions. Third, hybrid organizations and digital contexts warrant further attention. Social enterprises must strike a balance between social and business logics, while issues such as digital platforms, artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, data privacy, and digital finance continually raise new questions regarding transparency, accountability, and the creation of social value^[38–40, 45–59].

6.4 Research Limitations

This study has certain limitations. The research data primarily comes from the Web of Science Core Collection and is

restricted to English-language SSCI journals in the fields of business and management; consequently, books, book chapters, non-English literature, conference papers, and relevant research from adjacent disciplines have not been fully incorporated. The use of the search query TS = (legitimacy) facilitates the observation of the diffusion of the concept of legitimacy but may also include some literature that treats legitimacy merely as a secondary concept.

Furthermore, while bibliometric methods can demonstrate the visibility, interconnections, and thematic shifts in research, they cannot, on their own, elucidate the theoretical implications underlying these relationships ^[29, 30, 34–36]. Consequently, the network results presented here are best understood as structural clues rather than definitive explanations. Future research could build upon this foundation by integrating systematic content analysis to further examine how different studies define, utilize, and measure legitimacy.

7. Conclusion

Based on 6,034 literature records from the Web of Science database, this study examines research related to legitimacy in the fields of business and management from 1997 to 2025. The findings reveal that legitimacy research has expanded from its foundations in institutional theory and strategic studies to encompass multiple contexts, including entrepreneurship, CSR, sustainability reporting, ESG, governance accountability, international business, and digital platforms. Analysis of publication trends, journal distribution, co-citation networks, keyword clustering, keyword emergence, and thematic shifts indicates that new research themes have not supplanted the traditional framework of early legitimacy research but are instead continuously connecting and reconfiguring these traditions.

The concept of legitimacy remains important because it links organizational actions, social expectations, audience judgments, and the institutional environment. However, its flexibility also carries risks: if used too broadly, it can easily become merely another term for “approval” or “positive evaluation.” Future research needs to clarify the types of legitimacy, relevant audiences, evaluation criteria, and the processes by which legitimacy is acquired, maintained, challenged, restored, or lost. Only by clarifying these boundaries can legitimacy continue to serve as an explanatory analytical tool in business and management research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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