**Purpose**– This exploratory paper focuses on the role played by three archetypal constructs pertaining to the individual sustainability-oriented entrepreneur, namely prior knowledge, sustainability orientation and sustainability intention, in legitimation behavior and explores their strategic utility.

**Design/methodology/approach**– The author explores legitimacy-seeking behavior in the case of 10 sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs in the start-up phase. A qualitative case study approach is used to capture evidence through interviews, participant observation and documentation.

**Findings**– Prior knowledge and sustainability orientation emerge as necessary conditions for maintaining legitimacy. However, both appear to have limited strategic value for legitimation in comparison to sustainability intention. Intention as a construct embodies the ‘paradox’ of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship, and learning to successfully overcome this paradox to strategically utilise intention in legitimation is crucial for these entrepreneurs.

**Practical implications**– This knowledge could assist sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs in strategically utilizing these factors as agency when responding to multiple field logics to achieve their enterprising goals. Strengthening knowledge on factors important for legitimacy is pertinent in supporting this shared-value approach to entrepreneurship.

**Originality/value**– Little theoretical or empirical attention has been paid to the complexity of strategic legitimation behavior of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs. This paper is novel in providing empirical insight into the role these factors play in legitimation behavior and how they can be strategically utilised.

Keywords: Sustainability-oriented entrepreneur, legitimation, agency, intention, orientation, prior knowledge

##### **Introduction**

This paper examines ‘prior sustainability knowledge’, ‘sustainability orientation’ and ‘sustainability intention’ as three archetypal factors of entrepreneurial agency that together drive entrepreneurial behavior towards sustainable development. The specific focus of this paper is the strategic role that these factors play with regards to the legitimation behavior of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs in the start-up phase. Within the entrepreneurship literature, there is a growing focus on the need for entrepreneurs to be future orientated by creating value for the triple bottom line of people, planet, profit (Tilley and Young, 2009). For these entrepreneurs, sustainability issues are thought to be their driving force as well as their continuing raison d’être (Haigh and Hoffman, 2014). Sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship has been termed and defined in several ways in the literature. The current paper utilizes the definition put forward by O’Neill *et al.,* (2009) which is that sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship is “a process of venture creation that links the activities of entrepreneurs to the emergence of value-creating enterprises that aim to contribute to the sustainable development of the social-ecological system” (p. 34). This definition is inclusive of both environmentally and socially-oriented sustainability practices, focusing on the general intent to pursue any sustainability goals through entrepreneurial means more so than discriminating between different types of sustainability goals. Sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship embodies the notion of shared-value in business, which is essentially the creation of economic value in a way that also produces value for society by addressing its social or environmental challenges (Porter and Kramer, 2011). If such a model is possible, sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship should be considered as a fundamentally important area of research.

There have been a number of recent empirical advances in the understanding the factors that drive sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship (see e.g. Kuckertz and Wagner, 2010; Muñoz and Dimov, 2015; Parrish, 2010; Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011; Shepherd *et al.,* 2013). Despite these recent advances, the field is still emerging and requires further examination. For example, little conceptual or empirical attention has been paid to the complexity of the strategic legitimation behavior of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs despite what we know of how important legitimation can be for business success (Suchman, 1995). An entity is seen as legitimate when it is considered “desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The concept of legitimacy finds its origins in both strategic and institutional theoretical approaches to studying organisations and contends that adhering to practices or structures that are deemed acceptable within the organisational field leads to better stakeholder engagement, more successful resource acquisition and consequently increases chances of survival (Clarke, 2011; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). Gaining and maintaining legitimacy is an important yet persistently challenging task for any entrepreneur throughout the business lifecycle. For entrepreneurs who exist within a field characterised by multiple audiences with contradictory institutional expectations regarding legitimacy, such as those faced with pursuing both sustainability and profit goals, this task might be considered all the more challenging and merits examination (Mars and Lounsbury, 2009; Pache and Santos, 2013). A small number of recent papers have examined legitimacy in sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship (see e.g. DeClercq and Voronov, 2011; de Lange, 2016; Kibler *et al.,* 2015; O'Neil and Ucbasaran, 2016), presenting it as an underdeveloped area of conceptual and empirical research. Authors have looked at, for example, the role of territorial embeddedness and place-based legitimacy (Kibler *et al.,* 2015) and the role of legitimation in forming organisational fields (de Lange, 2016). The current paper aims to add to this growing literature by providing novel empirical information on how characteristics specific to the agency of these entrepreneurs play a role in legitimation.

According to a recent comprehensive review of the sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship literature carried out by Muñoz and Dimov (2015), a number of archetypal constructs pertain to the role of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs and together they are what drive entrepreneurial behavior towards sustainable development. These constructs have not received much attention holistically, although this is a major recommendation of Muñoz and Dimov (2015), and their role as factors of strategic agency in different aspects of the entrepreneurial process has not been explored. Strategic agency refers to the planned persuasion of ends by an individual actor within an institutional context (Beckert, 1999), be those ends profit or the sustainability goal. Human agency is an important component of legitimation activity in the field as it enables actors to enact their unique sustainability-related knowledge and values strategically to achieve legitimation goals in the field. The current paper provides insight into how these entrepreneurs can strategically utilise these constructs as agency in gaining and maintaining legitimacy. A case study approach is used, capturing entrepreneurs’ accounts of legitimation activity as well as conducting observations and document analysis, building upon a social constructionist approach for exploring strategic legitimation behavior.

##### **Theoretical foundations**

*Organisational fields*

All legitimacy-seeking actors exist within what are known as organisational fields. One definition is that of Hoffman (1999) who believes fields are “formed around the issues that become important to the interests and objectives of a specific collective of organizations” (p. 352) and the rules of the field determine what is legitimate (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Hoffman contends that the attention of actors within a field is concentrated on an issue or theme. For sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs, the issue would be sustainability. Actors can have either common or disputed interests within this issue, e.g. they might pursue different sustainability activities, but the debate and negotiation that occurs helps to shape the overall issue of sustainability and subsequently the field. The concept of the organizational field emerged as a central construct of neo-institutional theory (Scott, 2001), enabling the analysis of how actors, organisations and institutions interact. Neo-institutionalists are one of the main groups to have attempted to account for the strategic behavior of actors in fields, despite institutional theory being traditionally viewed as more appropriate for explaining structure and stability. Many scholars have traced the concept of agency in institutional theory to DiMaggio’s (1988) discussion of institutional entrepreneurship. Since this paper, the effects of individual and organisational agency on institutions has been a growing phenomenon of interest within the institutional theory approach (see e.g. Battilana *et al.,* 2009; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Lawrence *et al.,* 2013). This focus on agency has given rise to a new direction for neo-institutionalism which falls under the term ‘institutional work’, defined as “the purposive actions of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Institutional entrepreneurs are continuously carrying out institutional work to make change in their organisational field, strategizing to legitimise themselves and their practices. Despite attempts to overcome the longstanding dualism of structure and agency in this field (Lee and Jones, 2015), much of this literature retains a focus on the role of structural elements, an issue captured in the ‘paradox of embedded agency’ (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009; Seo and Creed, 2002), and thus falls short in explaining individual-level enabling conditions for agency.

Alternatively, Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) introduce the concept of ‘strategic actions fields’ which takes “the social constructionist aspects of institutional theory with a focused concern on how at their core, field processes are about who gets what” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, p. 8). Fligstein and McAdam’s definition of fields is comparable to institutionalist definitions in that they believe the field is a place where actors interact under common understandings and conditions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). However, this approach places more of an emphasis on the role of the individual actor as well as the strategic aspect of agency. This approach introduces the concept of ‘skilled strategic action’ of individual social actors, highlighting the strategic purpose behind actions and therefore offering a more nuanced explanation of strategic agentic behavior of individuals in organisational fields. Still, it is important not to become overly reliant on an approach that is primarily concerned with the actions of self-interested agents and that emphasises the fluidity of constraints in analysing strategic agency, as the rules of the field also play a role in shaping behavior. Therefore, both neo-institutional theory and strategic action fields theory can offer important insights into the strategic legitimation behavior of entrepreneurs within fields.

Fligstein and McAdam also offer important insights for the organisational field of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship in another way. They "conceive of all fields as embedded in complex webs of other fields" (2012, p. 18), with clear overlap between fields. In the literature, entrepreneurship orientated towards different sustainability goals is often categorised as either environmental or social entrepreneurship (Parrish and Tilley, 2010). However, Tilley and Young (2009) argue that while environmentally-orientated, socially-orientated and traditional economic-orientated entrepreneurship can all contribute in part to the sustainable development of the social-ecological system, viewing them separately might perpetuate the problem of the inherent trade-off associated with the three pillars of sustainability. This contradicts the holistic triple-bottom line approach to true sustainable development. In addition, Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) in developing a typology of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship behavior actually categorise social and environmental entrepreneurship as types of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship. This idea of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship as an umbrella term is also asserted by Dean and McMullen (2007). The current paper follows this line of reasoning and argues that in examining legitimation, the field of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship should not be delineated too definitively from the social and environmental entrepreneurship fields as these fields naturally overlap. Further, Hofmann (1999)’s definition, in which fields centre around issues of interest, also offers insight into the definition of this field by reinforcing the argument that the specific type of sustainability is not as important as sharing in discussion and debate around the overall common goal of sustainable development. The theoretical foundations of legitimacy are presented below, followed by a discussion on the archetypal factors that drive sustainability-oriented entrepreneur behavior.

*Legitimacy*

Enterprises are ongoing processes of social interaction and learning (Dimov, 2007) and entrepreneurs must be adaptable to changing stakeholder judgments in legitimation (Navis and Glynn, 2011). Legitimacy must be gained but also maintained continuously throughout the business life-cycle of entrepreneurs, beginning with the nascent phase. In this phase, entrepreneurs must overcome ‘newness’ and demonstrate congruence between the enterprise and dominant stakeholder expectations (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Martens *et al.,* 2007). This nascent phase is when the entrepreneur is most vulnerable and it is considered relatively more challenging to gain legitimacy in this phase (Voronov *et al.,* 2013). For those who successfully emerge from this, the next phase, known as the start-up phase, typically does not offer much solace. During the start-up phase, entrepreneurs have begun to develop their understanding of what is required in the field and are actively pursuing legitimacy. Entrepreneurs in this phase must continually seek legitimacy from new sources as organisational fields develop and power shifts between dominant actors. Therefore, gaining should be a strategic focus of entrepreneurs throughout the business lifecycle.

The next task of the entrepreneur is to maintain legitimacy. This is regarded as a crucial yet less challenging phase (Suchman, 1995). Studies of established enterprises highlight a number of ways in which they can strategically gain as well as maintain this legitimacy (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, 2002). This paper examines sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs’ accounts of gaining and maintaining in the start-up phase as they strategize for both persistence and meaning. Suchman (1995) asserts that achieving legitimacy can enhance persistence in that legitimacy encourages stakeholders to act favourably towards the entity which leads to resource acquisition and survival. Legitimacy can also enhance meaning in that it improves stakeholders’ understanding of an entity when it is considered more trustworthy and predictable. Meaning is a critical concept within the legitimacy literature as entrepreneurs must act within the socially constructed system of values, beliefs and meaning.

There exists a stream of literature on the values, beliefs, judgements and meaning system of those actors who grant legitimacy within the field (see e.g. Huy *et al.,* 2014; Navis and Glynn, 2011). Yet surprisingly, as highlighted in a recent study by O'Neil and Ucbasaran (2016), those of the legitimacy seeker, (i.e. the entrepreneur), have received far less attention. This is true of the entrepreneurship literature generally as well as for the sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship literature. For the latter, the literature points to a number of values, beliefs, desires and convictions which are particular to these entrepreneurs which can be organised into archetypal factors (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015). Although the literature acknowledges that the values and beliefs of entrepreneurs must play a role in traditional entrepreneurial legitimation (see e.g. Drori and Honig; 2013; Rindova *et al.*, 2009; Williams-Middleton, 2013) and sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial legitimation (De Clerq and Voronov, 2011; O'Neil and Ucbasaran; 2016), we do not know exactly what this role is or how these entrepreneurs can strategically utilize these factors in responding to diverse audience expectations in the field. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by focusing on the legitimacy-seeker and examining the strategic role of these archetypal factors as agency in legitimacy.

*Archetypal factors as agency*

Sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs are recognised as distinct from traditional entrepreneurs who pursue solely economic enterprise opportunities, and a number of individual factors have been found to lead to this form of entrepreneurship (Dixon and Clifford, 2007; Kuckertz and Wagner, 2010; Parrish, 2010; Spence *et al.,* 2010). A recent study carried out by Muñoz and Dimov (2015) revealed that factors relating to the sustainability-oriented enterprise development process that are normally considered as separate and individually important are not actually sufficient conditions by themselves in explaining outcomes. In this regard, authors suggest that future research must consider these factors collectively as holistic configurations which taken together can explain the pursuit of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship. The authors arrived at this position after conducting a comprehensive review of the sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship literature in which they identified four archetypal constructs that pertain to the individual entrepreneur. First is prior knowledge, defined as “prior knowledge of ecological and social environments and the perceived threats to such environments” (Ibid, p. 640). Individuals are more likely to discover venturing opportunities the greater their prior knowledge or experience in the field, and the more they perceive this field as being threatened (Patzelt and Shepherd, 2011). Second is orientation, defined as “underlying attitudes and convictions” about issues of “environmental protection and social responsibility”, and how this links to “entrepreneurial intention focused on sustainable development” (Kuckertz and Wagner, 2010, p. 531). Thirdly, sustainability intention is defined as “the intention to contribute to solving societal and environmental problems through entrepreneurial means” (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015, p. 640). This construct essentially refers to the entrepreneur’s intent to succeed at pursuing the goals relating to their sustainability orientation in a way that results in a successful business venture (Keskin *et al.,* 2013; Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). It requires the entrepreneur to pursue and enact an entrepreneurial and professional approach to sustainable development. The final construct identified is desired value creation, defined as “the value that sustainable entrepreneurs aim to create both for their business and for society” (Muñoz and Dimov, p. 640). The desired value creation construct was excluded from analysis in the current paper as it was not believed to be of strategic utility in legitimation. While questions could be asked to elicit concrete examples of the strategic use of prior knowledge, orientation and intention in managing diverse stakeholder expectations, this could not be done for desired value creation. The researcher also believed that actions taken by entrepreneurs to utilize both orientation and intention would reflect the overall desired value creation and it did not merit individual analysis.

Battilana (2006) contends that linking individual agency and societal structures requires us to “explain under which conditions individuals are enabled to act as institutional entrepreneurs” (Battilana, 2006). Weik (2011) makes the point that within the institutional entrepreneurship literature this is a prominent topic as theorists are hugely concerned with which conditions produce entrepreneurs, i.e. trigger entrepreneurial behavior. It is necessary to understand what triggers entrepreneurial behavior in order to better understand agency and its strategic role. In the sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship literature, these archetypal factors have been identified as responsible for triggering entrepreneurial behavior towards sustainable development. Therefore, the current paper argues that it is these factors that characterise the entrepreneur’s agency and thus it is through the use of these factors that entrepreneurs have the capacity to enact institutional work and strategic action, strategizing to legitimize themselves and their enterprises within the field. This paper therefore builds on the work of Muñoz and Dimov (2015) in examining factors that together drive sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial behavior by exploring what role these factors have in legitimation activity and how they can be used strategically.

##### **Method**

A qualitative, multiple case study approach was used to explore the legitimation activity of 10 sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs based in Ireland. Case study research was conducted over a 6-month period between October 2015 and March 2016. This involved semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs as well as documentation and observational research. In the case of socially constructed phenomena such as legitimacy, understanding the process through which phenomena become reality, how this reality is reproduced and maintained and how this can be strategically manipulated requires a fine-grained, contextual qualitative approach as found in case study research (Yin, 2009). This is perhaps one of the reasons why the case study approach is popular amongst scholars studying the complexities of legitimacy for traditional entrepreneurs (see e.g. Williams-Middleton, 2013; Zott and Huy, 2007) as well as those examining the complexities of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship (see e.g. O'Neil and Ucbasaran; 2016; Parrish, 2010; Pache and Santos, 2013).

Extant research within the field of traditional entrepreneurship has supported a social constructionist perspective for exploring various individual level agentic aspects of the process of entrepreneurship (see e.g. Aldrich and Martinez, 2010; Downing, 2005). Such an approach is effective in providing an understanding of the ‘why’ of human behavior, revealing details of intention, reason and purpose that exist behind strategic action and are therefore appropriate in exploring how legitimacy is gained and maintained. The use of interviews, observation and document analysis enables the researcher to elicit specific accounts from the entrepreneur through interviews, to set this against observations, as well as to compare this with competing or complementing evidence in relevant documentation. A multiple case study approach enables the generation of theoretical insight through the comparative dimension of analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin 2009). The data collection process and analysis techniques are outlined.

*Selection of cases*

Ten entrepreneurs were chosen using three selection criteria based on the principles of theoretical sampling as well as convenience (Seawright and Gerring 2008). The first criterion was that the entrepreneur fit the definition of a ‘sustainability-oriented entrepreneur’ as defined in the literature, focusing on the characteristics of the individual more so than the industry in which they are located. Due to the individual entrepreneur-level focus of the current study, it was deemed most important by the researcher that the individual entrepreneurs displayed characteristics in line with the theory. This was assessed by explaining the definition to the potential participants and asking them to confirm that they are indeed the founders of enterprises which aim to contribute to the sustainable development of the social-ecological system. Secondly, it was important that the entrepreneurs all operated within the same organisational field and thus were all reacting and responding to the same institutional environment. Therefore, the third selection criterion was that entrepreneurs had to be based in Ireland so as to minimize variation due to environmental factors (Zott and Huy, 2007). Entrepreneurs from a specific geographic area were also selected so as to facilitate ease of access. Finally, the entrepreneur behind the organisation had to be in a position to discuss the start-up phase of an enterprise over two years old. With these criteria in mind, the researcher searched online using the key terms “sustainability”, “enterprise”, “entrepreneur” and “Ireland”. The researcher came across three websites listing sustainability-oriented organisations. A list of appropriate entrepreneurs was developed by examining individual enterprise websites and other available online information about the entrepreneur. These entrepreneurs were contacted by email and phone, and ten cases were chosen based on their adherence to the above criteria. Pseudonyms are used in all cases to provide anonymity.

**[Insert Table 1 about here]**

*Entrepreneur Interviews*

Transcribed interviews were used as the central source of data. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour (45 minutes average) and all but two interviews were recorded. Interviews were semi-structured, ensuring that participants were directed towards discussing points of theoretical importance but also allowing new issues to emerge. Subsequently, directive questions, grand tour questions and prompts were used (Leech, 2002). Questions were designed to elicit examples of strategic action in attempts to gain and maintain legitimacy, for example: “How did you present yourself to the resource holder to acquire this resource?” More directive questions were also asked in relation to the role of the archetypal factors such as “how did your feelings and convictions about your sustainability issue come into play when you were dealing with this stakeholder?”, “how important was your prior knowledge in this situation and in what way was it important?”

*Observation*

Observation is a useful means of capturing how humans construct accounts of experiences and the meaning they attribute to different aspects (Jorgensen, 1989). Non-verbal communication is not sufficiently captured in recorded interviews even though it is important to recognise the context in which information is communicated. The researcher observed non-verbal communication of information regarding legitimation, noting if a specific term used appeared to trigger a participant response and noting the general observed attitude of the participant in relation to different aspects of the interview material. The researcher also utilized field observation as a means of capturing how participants interact with their work environment.

*Documents*

A variety of document types were included in the analysis such as company websites, blogs written by and documenting the activities of the entrepreneur, social network sites, media coverage, brochures, and customer testimonials. Table 1 includes a summary of the type of documents gathered. Some of these documents provided evidence of how the legitimation approach of the entrepreneur had changed over time e.g. customer testimonials, social network pages, media coverage and blogs. However, websites and brochures, depending on when they were created or last updated, only represented the current phase of the venture and sometimes did not provide evidence of strategies for gaining legitimacy in start-up. Information in the documentation is not taken as fact, but as evidence of strategies for persuasion (Ruebottom, 2013). Quotes from documentation are not included so as to preserve anonymity.

*Analysis*

A social constructionist thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was carried out. This was an iterative process, moving from individual case analysis to cross-case comparison of patterns and themes as well as revisiting the literature (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994), as detailed in Table 2. The six phases of analysis are largely based on the guidelines for thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) who highlight that a social constructionist approach to thematic analysis considers that meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced and considers the institutional actors that shape and enable the entrepreneurs’ accounts. Given that the strategic value of archetypal constructs in legitimation is determined by the audience’s socially constructed value system and the entrepreneur is tasked with judging and reacting to this value system, it is important to approach the analysis of this topic in a way that considers this audience.

**[Insert Table 2 about here]**

Interviews were transcribed and field notes were organised alongside interview transcripts to provide context and thus clearer understanding of entrepreneur responses. Findings from document analysis were noted and these were also organised manually alongside interview transcripts. First order coding was data-driven, beginning with descriptive codes representing key legitimation moments and interesting features of the data for each individual case which resulted in 40 first order codes. Next, the codes were compared across cases to determine which were recurrent and thus most relevant. These codes captured cross-case features such as specific behaviors, outcomes of behaviors, perceived challenges and meanings relating to the the constructs. This resulted in 22 first order codes.

The next phase entailed moving from a descriptive to a more analytical approach and involved analysing the first order codes to see how they might combine to form potential themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006), resulting in 12 second-order codes. For example, ‘demonstrating knowledge for trust’ and ‘knowledge helps avoid trouble and stick to rules’ were distinct features of the data themselves but could be grouped under the second order code ‘multiple uses of prior knowledge’. This phase remained data-driven, with the next and final phase detailing the progression to the six overarching themes.

In the final phase of the analysis, the literature was revisited and the importance of organising findings under the separate dimensions of gaining and maintaining legitimacy was decided upon. This was because the theoretical difference between gaining and maintaining legitimacy is a significant point of distinction in the legitimacy literature (Suchman, 1995) and an important antecedent of legitimation behavior. The second order codes were subsequently grouped according to how they pertained to either gaining legitimacy from new legitimacy-granters or maintaining legitimacy in the start-up phase. Themes should reflect some level of patterned response or meaning in the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and for the current research, the task was to capture the patterned meaning of these constructs in legitimation. Resulting overarching themes are based on important instances where legitimation behavior occurred and consequently, themes capture how archetypal factors manifest differently in gaining and maintaining legitimacy (see Figure 1). The main findings are those that were apparent across multiple cases, after data triangulation, as well as those that stood out as potentially interesting areas for future research. Details on these findings are presented below.

**[Insert Figure 1 about here]**

##### **Findings**

Key quotes from the interviews, context descriptions as well references to the documentation are used to illustrate the findings on the strategic role of each construct in gaining and maintaining. Findings are presented under the six themes identified.

*Prior Knowledge Gaining*

Across cases, it was found that learning to demonstrate prior knowledge was considered quite valuable for gaining legitimacy in the start-up phase. Entrepreneurs articulated that stakeholders want to see a level of expertise from them and learning to demonstrate this expertise is valuable for legitimacy. An example is when James spoke of how people interested in availing of their services would be attracted by the fact himself and his staff were from the local area and therefore really knew the flora and fauna:

[They want] a local group so they are experts in local issues and are available to share that knowledge.

James believed demonstrating experience was the most important factor overall in gaining legitimacy and prior knowledge was repeatedly mentioned as important for legitimacy across cases. Additionally, documentation continuously featured details of prior knowledge and it appears as an important feature of most advertising and marketing for these entrepreneurs. In discussing ways in which she might communicate her prior knowledge, Kate pointed to her website:

I think the website is very important for us, our customers always say they find it useful and that’s where people go to find out about us (Kate).

Interviews also revealed the type of prior knowledge most valued and the ways in which this was used by entrepreneurs. In relation to type, practical experience in the field of sustainability appears to be more important for legitimacy than formal training on sustainability issues. When discussing prior knowledge, many entrepreneurs were referring to this practical experience, with interviews and documents revealing the use of the terms “hands-on experience” and “know-how” far more than “education” or “training”.

I got involve actually initially through gardening which sounds strange but that was my first connection with nature and then I started to get involved in gardening in my son's school and helped set up the green flag initiative in his school with a group and then started to research different things that could be done as part of the green flag and that eventually lead me to recycling and repurposing material, especially clothes. (Jenny)

Qualifications don't have to...they're only supposed to be an indication of knowledge that you have. I suppose in starting up I would have had much more experience and just know-how than qualifications. (Robert)

Further examples of the strategic utility of prior knowledge were given by Paul, Henry and Amy and it emerged that prior knowledge was primarily demonstrated to gain legitimacy in two ways; to gain trust and to fit in by not breaking rules.

People know we’ve been around a long time, we’re market leaders...like again if you take our project that we have here, next to no one has moved out of the place. People move here, not from here. There's a degree of trust there and that’s important for legitimacy. (Paul)

You can get more from people if they know you’re an expert. You know who to keep happy...how to keep people interested...your experience is what’s valued at the end of the day. (Henry)

Having that [prior] experience helps keep out of trouble...you know to avoid being too ‘clicky’ in a small place like this. (Amy)

Down to my in-house knowledge, which diverges from advice I've received from experts but I know what I do works. Say with the regulations, a lot of buildings don’t meet standards...any time there was new regulations, say there was new regulations coming out in 2018, I’d be researching it now to make sure we’d be going way ahead of it. (Paul)

This idea of staying ‘within rules’ was a prominent feature of entrepreneurs’ responses regarding the utility of prior knowledge. Many entrepreneurs suggested experience in the field has taught them that if you generally behave as you are supposed to, exercising transparency, honesty and avoiding ‘shortcuts’, legitimacy can be gained from a variety of stakeholders.

*Prior Knowledge Maintaining*

Prior knowledge appeared as far less relevant a strategic resource for maintaining legitimacy. Findings suggest prior knowledge becomes taken for granted by existing stakeholders once a degree of legitimacy has been gained and continuous demonstration of prior knowledge and experience in the field is no longer strategically useful.

You do what you do...you have to have that know-how but people don’t really see that, they just know you’re working...like you wouldn’t have to keep convincing people that you’re qualified, they know you probably are. (Paul)

For me, I have a lot of repeat customers, a lot of regulars since the beginning and once I have those people coming in the door I never spend much time hoping people take a chance on me because of my experience. (James)

Despite this reported lack of utility, entrepreneurs appear to maintain legitimacy across time from existing stakeholders, as evidenced by no mention of loss of stakeholder relationships and entrepreneurs discussing “repeat customers” and “regulars”. Therefore, the researcher noted that prior knowledge exists as an underlying condition enabling entrepreneurs to continue, despite not being considered strategically useful for legitimacy.

In a small number of cases, entrepreneurs expressed concern for the future, predicting that the value of demonstrating prior knowledge would be surpassed by the need to learn, adapt to change and innovate:

There’s no guarantee prior knowledge makes you more willing and able to learn. (Colin)

I’d be wary of overconfidence or overreliance on what you know about what’s come before...there’s always so much more to learn. (Paul)

This community is constantly changing...new families and students coming to live...it can be hard to keep up with what they want...I’m 30 years working [in this field] but I don’t think I have that knowledge. (Susan)

Prior knowledge was highlighted as something that could become a barrier to change in the future if it is not demonstrated alongside further training and experience.

*Sustainability Orientation* *Gaining*

In structuring and branding themselves as sustainability-oriented, entrepreneurs learned that the demonstration of orientation was not useful for legitimacy and often, it was of secondary interest to many stakeholders including customers, collaborators and some suppliers. Orientation emerged as valuable for entrepreneurs personally more so than strategically and professionally. The researcher observed orientation as a prominent point of focus throughout interviews, with entrepreneurs continuously referring to their passions, values and beliefs around their sustainability mission:

I’d describe myself as very radical and extremely passionate about sustainability (Susan).

There’s a deep connection there, long before this I’ve always had a deep connection...I saw rivers that I never saw the like of in my life and I was deeply touched by these (Kate).

For many years I have felt a strong connection with nature and this has led me to seek out the truth about the environment everywhere I’ve travelled on this beautiful planet. (Colin)

Entrepreneurs reported how they would initially be eager to demonstrate their values to new stakeholders, but that this was often met with what can be described as indifference:

I wouldn’t say it [showing orientation] alienates us but it’s like they don’t really care either way (Paul).

We have to think of ourselves as a clothes shop at the end of the day and most of the ladies who come here are interested in the quality of our materials over the ethical production story (Jenny).

Orientation was also a feature of much of the documentation, with many entrepreneurs having blogs detailing their passion towards their sustainability issue. Their strong orientation appeared to make the reality of lack of stakeholder appreciation difficult to accept. Entrepreneurs expressed surprise at and difficulty with how orientation was not strategically useful in legitimation:

It's difficult to deal with people not appreciating what you’re about… [I] didn’t think it would be that way. (Kate)

I still can’t believe sometimes that this isn’t on people’s radars...I learned the hard way [that it’s not important]. (Jenny)

*Sustainability Orientation Maintaining*

In order to maintain legitimacy, entrepreneurs had to overcome any initial surprise and difficulty with stakeholder reactions, accept this reality and adjust their legitimation work. Susan discussed how her place in the local community was realised through this acceptance. After discussing some difficulties she initially experienced with negative reactions from the community due to her ‘radical’ image, she acknowledges:

Still we are like our own little eco-system out here, we depend on each other even if what I’m doing seems radical to them (Susan).

Interviews revealed that in attempting to maintain legitimacy, entrepreneurs accept that orientation has little value externally for legitimacy and should no longer be eagerly demonstrated to stakeholders:

It’s not like anyone would come in and ask questions to see if I really care...some of them might look at the mission statement, is it genuine and authentic and transparent...come on...really nobody cares. (James)

I’d love to say yes it’s so valued but definitely it’s a no compared to knowing what your customer wants or organisation and efficiency. (Ben)

Orientation was described by one entrepreneur as:

...crucial to keep you going. It helps to think of why you started (Robert).

This statement demonstrates the apparent consensus on the extent of orientation’s strategic utility in maintaining which is that it exists as a necessary condition for motivation and thus continuation, was found for maintaining prior knowledge. A number of entrepreneurs did actually mentioned that some niche stakeholders do express interest in their orientation, but that it can be difficult to judge this and so it does not merit strategic attention. Entrepreneurs remain committed to pursuing goals related to their orientation through entrepreneurial means.

*Sustainability Intention Gaining*

Intention appears as the most useful factor across cases in strategizing to gain legitimacy during start-up. Entrepreneurs continuously highlighted the importance of demonstrating skills as an entrepreneur and as a business professional and it emerged that this was done mostly through use of professional language and through demonstrating professionalism in structure. For example:

When I go to networking events and courses and my language is different because I’m trying to present that image of being ‘businessy’. (Colin)

I’ll imitate friends who have real business heads on them when I’m talking to certain suppliers or customers. (Ben)

The best way to achieve your goals is to be seen as professional. My advice to anyone starting out in this funny type of entrepreneurial endeavour is focus on how to show yourself as a competitor of mainstream business...because you’re running your operation the exact same way. (Colin)

Things like having our premises in the city, having an address and website, that’s professional and I’ve learnt that’s so important (Kate).

Interviews with entrepreneurs revealed how stakeholders appear to place value on the demonstration of entrepreneurial ability above any other factor for legitimacy and entrepreneurs appear to have a good understanding of this and how it requires them to behave. Documentation across cases also revealed attempts to convey professionalism and business acumen through promoting any accreditations, certifications or affiliations with more commercially-orientated networks and communities.

However, despite the agreed importance of demonstrating intention, it emerged in several cases that entrepreneurs feel uncomfortable with the image of being entrepreneurial. Kate discussed how entering her sustainability idea into a social entrepreneurship competition lead to her enterprise success but that she never really intended on going down that route:

I’m uncomfortable with that image of entrepreneur...I will always think of myself as that activist who was in the right place at the right time. (Kate)

This sentiment was echoed by Henry when probed about his feelings towards demonstrating intention in gaining legitimacy:

I find it hard to identify with that, I’m just into the conservation in all honesty. (Henry)

This expressed discomfort appeared to be the result of a perceived dichotomy between orientation and intention in which expressing intention somehow infringed on or compromised the orientation of entrepreneurs. Intention was even demonstrated by one entrepreneur to avoid the perception within the local community of being a ‘hippy’ or ‘hipster’ which was said to imply negative characteristics that conflict with entrepreneurialism and professionalism. Being a ‘hippie’ is to:

Separate yourself from the local community...you need to show the professionalism of your work to escape that image. (Susan)

*Sustainability Intention Maintaining*

Intention again emerged as very important in maintaining. Entrepreneurs continuously expressed attempts to conform to a more professional logic and demonstrate entrepreneurial intention for sustainability to please stakeholders and maintain legitimacy:

Goals keep you going mentally but it’s [your] entrepreneurial business mind [that’s important]. (Jenny)

Certifications and awards, they’re very important. It gives the impression that you’re the real deal. (James)

This was achieved by looking to others and learning how best to demonstrate intention:

I’m learning to be more practical and organised with how I get information out...I think it helps to be taken seriously. (Henry)

I’m getting better at the numbers because that’s important to people. (Robert)

Demonstrating the intent to pursue sustainability goals through entrepreneurial means remains an important factor in legitimation for these entrepreneurs. Findings indicate that maintaining legitimacy requires entrepreneurs to refine and enhance their ability to demonstrate intention. The challenge is to overcome the perception that doing so will compromise their orientation which itself is a necessary factor for continuation on the entrepreneurial path. The main findings and implications are discussed below.

**[Inset Table 3 about here]**

##### **Discussion**

This paper set out to explore the role and strategic utility of archetypal constructs pertaining to the legitimacy seeking sustainability-oriented entrepreneur in legitimation. Findings from interviews, observations and documentation revealed that all three constructs manifest in both gaining and maintaining legitimation behavior to differing extents and that there is degree of interdependence amongst them, with intention emerging as most strategically useful. This paper contributes to the emerging field of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship in a number of ways. Firstly, this paper sheds light on the under-explored area of legitimation in the start-up phase for sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs by offering novel insight into the strategic role of prior knowledge, sustainability orientation and sustainability intention in entrepreneurs' legitimation behavior. While extant literature leans towards structural explanations for organisational field behavior, this paper returns focus to the strategic individual entrepreneur and thus supports the views of Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012). By focusing on the individual entrepreneur, this paper provides empirical evidence on the important role of individual legitimacy-seekers in carrying out institutional work to incite change in the organisational field by strategizing to legitimise themselves and their practices. “Through processes of social construction, entrepreneurs can develop new meanings that may eventually alter institutional norms, beginning at organisational level” (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994, p. 649). Moreover, by exploring the strategic utility of these factors, this paper highlights the strategic purpose behind actions which offers a more nuanced explanation of the behavior of entrepreneurs in organisational fields. Research on strategic agency can help progress knowledge on entrepreneurial behavior in the emerging field of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship. The implications for the findings on each construct are elaborated on below.

This paper responds to the recommendation for research on the role of prior knowledge in legitimation of value-driven entrepreneurs who contemplate whether prior knowledge might benefit the entrepreneur in speeding up legitimation and enable the entrepreneur to encounter less dissonance from diverse stakeholders (De Clercq and Voronov, 2011; O'Neil and Ucbasaran, 2016). and The main finding is that prior knowledge does indeed appear to be used strategically by entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy in the start-up phase. Specifically, practical experience in the field is valued by a diversity of stakeholders and this practical experience is demonstrated to gain legitimacy in two ways; so as to gain trust and to stay out of trouble by following the rules. It appears that in their legitimation work, entrepreneurs were most concerned about being seen in a positive light by stakeholders as opposed to explicit resource acquisition, which is similar to the findings of Clarke (2011) whereby entrepreneurs attempted to gain legitimacy to better engage stakeholders. The importance of prior knowledge in this phase, especially for novice entrepreneurs, has also been identified in the field of traditional entrepreneurship (see e.g. Mitteness *et al.,* 2013), but this importance diminishes over time as it becomes taken for granted.

In relation to maintaining legitimacy, entrepreneurs discussed how prior knowledge was not something they would strategically demonstrate to existing stakeholders. Despite this consensus among entrepreneurs, prior knowledge was still found to be a necessary condition for continuation, which echoes the findings of Muñoz and Dimov (2015), who found prior knowledge to be a “necessary condition at best”, and one that “needs to be complemented by other (perhaps more important) factors in driving the entrepreneurial process forward” (p. 649). Prior knowledge exists as an underlying factor that helps entrepreneurs to continue to pursue their sustainability goals through entrepreneurial means, i.e, intention. This supports the argument that they should be considered as holistic factors. Although prior knowledge is not reported as strategically valuable, in reality it is likely that entrepreneurs must “continually make and remake stories to maintain their identity and status” (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001: 560).

Prior knowledge was even reported as something that could potentially become harmful beyond the start-up phase if entrepreneurs are seen to be over reliant on talking about their past experiences as they could be viewed as being opposed to innovation and unwilling to embrace change. Although practical experience emerged as most important for gaining, perhaps formal education is becoming more important in the field and should be considered for maintaining legitimacy. Entrepreneurs must understand the diminishing utility of prior knowledge and learn to adapt their legitimation work when moving from the gaining to maintaining phase with existing stakeholders. It is critical that entrepreneurs stay current in their areas of expertise and this could be enhanced by ongoing professional development. By underlining this as a possible obstacle, this paper adds to be body of literature highlighting the challenges of legitimation such as those that arise in establishing expectations (Garud *et. al.,* 2014), demonstrating conformity with institutional norms while maintaining ‘legitimate distinctiveness’ (Navis and Glynn, 2011) and skillfully taking symbolic action (Zott and Huy, 2007).

Many authors in the sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship literature have empirically examined the beliefs, attitudes, convictions and values of entrepreneurs that lead them to pursue opportunities for sustainable development in the form of venturing (e.g. see Muñoz and Dimov, 2015 for summary). This paper offers a novel approach to this construct in exploring how it can be strategically utilised in legitimation. Findings also suggest that, much like prior knowledge and intention, orientation and intention are related but distinct constructs (Valliere, 2017) and the real merit of sustainability orientation is as an ever-present, underlying factor that drives the entrepreneurs to stay on their entrepreneurial path in pursuit of sustainability goals, i.e intention. This mirrors the relationship between prior knowledge and intention and further demonstrates why they should be considered holistically. Sustainability orientation was generally found to be far less strategically valuable than prior knowledge or intention due to lack of interest from stakeholders, which initially came as a surprise to entrepreneurs. Value-driven entrepreneurs in the start-up stage of business appear to overestimate the level of support they will receive from sustainability-minded stakeholders, as was found by O'Neil and Ucbasaran (2016) and consequently overestimate the strategic utility of their orientation. This compares to the findings on prior knowledge in that entrepreneurs must learn to accept this lack of appreciation and adapt their legitimation work when moving from the gaining to maintaining phase. Overall, although these entrepreneurs exhibit strong orientation, it was not found to have strategic utility in gaining or maintaining legitimacy during start-up. This raises questions for the role of the entrepreneur within their sustainability-oriented enterprise regarding the extent to which stakeholders would like them and their sustainability values to be a visible component of the enterprise.

Sustainability intention is quite clearly the most important factor for gaining and maintaining legitimacy as it is highly valued by a diversity of stakeholders. It was found that intention was predominantly demonstrated in two ways; through language and structure. In the traditional entrepreneurship legitimacy field, legitimation through language is well documented (Lounsbury and Glynn; Martens *et al.,* 2007). However, Clarke (2011) argues that pursuing legitimacy through language is insufficient and that entrepreneurs should also present visual symbols to stakeholders in their legitimation to “present an appropriate scene to stakeholders and create professional identity” (p. 1366). Therefore, the current findings on the importance of demonstrating intent through both language as well as structure reflect research within the traditional entrepreneurship field.

The successful utilisation of sustainability intention in legitimation during start-up meant that entrepreneurs could be perceived as ‘business savvy’, bestowing them with acceptance from a wider range of stakeholders. Having the ability to demonstrate this intention successfully was found to be crucial for combating negative stakeholder judgments regarding entrepreneurs being too focused on their values and convictions. Entrepreneurs seemed to become increasingly aware of a dichotomy between orientation and intention in that too much focus on their sustainability orientation could compromise their focus on the business logic, and this could exclude them from a wider audience of stakeholders. This resonates with the findings of Kuckertz and Wagner, (2010) who found that the positive impact of sustainability orientation vanishes with business experience due to both individual and external factors.

Interestingly, although entrepreneurs acknowledge its importance, several expressed that they feel uncomfortable with their ‘entrepreneurial identity’. This could act as a barrier to successful utilisation of this construct in legitimation and therefore this conflict is something that needs to be examined further to advance understanding of sustainability-oriented legitimation. Rindova *et al.,* (2009) discuss what they refer to as the “fundamental paradox of the entrepreneurial dynamic” (p. 483). This refers to the way in which all entrepreneurs, traditional and otherwise, are faced with finding a balance between pursuing their values, beliefs and desires relating to their entrepreneurial venture, and managing the constraints posed by legitimacy-granters. A similar argument was presented by De Clercq and Voronov (2011) in the case of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs. The current paper argues that sustainability intention as a construct embodies this ‘paradox’ for sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship. In pursuing sustainability goals through entrepreneurialism, entrepreneurs might appear to be displaying contradictory intentions and aims which could cause them to fall between the gap of sustainability-oriented and economically-oriented stakeholder judgements to a place where they are never entirely accepted by either. Learning to successfully overcome this paradox to strategically utilise intention in legitimation is the ultimate challenge of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs, as well as their ultimate goal. This requires further examination of the strategic, agentic behavior of these entrepreneurs in legitimacy. This paper suggests that continuous professional development and coaching could help balance these perceptions of conflict and that skilful management of this conflict should be a benchmark of good practice in sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship. Understanding this tension is therefore also important for policy initiatives that aim to support the emergence of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship.

There are some limitations to this research, for example, the reliance on retrospective self-reports of events by entrepreneurs as the main data source. A longitudinal approach to the study of socially constructed phenomena such as legitimation is perhaps most appropriate. Such an approach would also have enabled the researcher to collect documentation over the course of time and analyse changes in how legitimacy is strategized for in documentation. This will require the development and maintenance of longitudinal databases of sustainability-orientated enterprises.

Additionally, this study is limited to the chosen empirical landscape of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs in Ireland, and therefore the findings might not be generalisable beyond this specific population. However, this is the nature of case study research in that, although it reveals less detail and generalisability, it leads to initial insights into underlying theory and a foundation for theory development (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Future research examining legitimation of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs could address these shortcomings and build on insights from extant multiple case study research in this field and the wider traditional entrepreneurship field to develop a framework for entrepreneurial legitimation. Future research could also Future research should also not only focus on the individual legitimacy-seeker and delve deeper into the strategic, agentic behavior of these entrepreneurs in legitimacy, but also include the perspectives of multiple legitimacy-granters in analysis to paint a full picture of how legitimacy is socially constructed in the field. Finally, research should examine the interplay between both internal factors of agency and external institutional factors and how sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs manage this interplay in their legitimation work.

##### **Conclusion**

This paper assists in shedding light on the complexity of legitimation in the case of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs. The main contribution is an insight into the strategic utility of factors that drive entrepreneurial behavior towards sustainable development. Ruebottom (2013) found that social entrepreneurs are not necessarily conscious of the rhetorical strategies they employ to build legitimacy but recommend that this rhetorical strategy should be developed as a core competency. This requires a focus on the strategic, purposeful and conscious behavior of entrepreneurs in pursuit of legitimacy and the factors that play a role in shaping this strategic agentic behavior. In this paper, it was found that sustainability intention appears to best withstand judgements of diverse stakeholders as a strategic resource and learning to successfully overcome the ‘paradox’ and demonstrate intention should be considered as an important strategic goal in legitimation for sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs. While the current paper explored how internal factors of agency play a role in legitimation, this legitimation behavior is also a response to external factors and so examining legitimation behavior can also provide insight into what is considered acceptable in the field. Strengthening empirical evidence on both internal and external factors important for legitimacy can help support the growth of entrepreneurial behavior towards sustainable development.

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