

Research Paper: Examining the Impact of Cultural Factors on Rural Entrepreneurship Development: An Integrated Conceptual Model for the Eastern Zayandeh Rud Region Isfahan, Central Iran

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This research examines the influence of cultural factors on the development and sustainability of entrepreneurship in rural areas, focusing on the eastern border of the Zayandeh River, Isfahan.

Methods: Using qualitative analysis and semi-structured interviews with 40 key stakeholders (rural entrepreneurs, local managers, rural business experts, and trainers), four main factors were identified: 1) resilience, 2) gender equality, 3) strengthening and preserving local identity and indigenous resources, and 4) positive beliefs and attitudes of the local community towards entrepreneurship and economic opportunities.

Results: The results show that the resilience of entrepreneurs in addressing economic and environmental challenges is critical. Moreover, reducing cultural barriers to gender equality can help increase participation and innovation among female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the importance of local identity and indigenous resources is clearly evident, showing that the use of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage can lead to sustainable business practices. Finally, the positive attitude of society towards entrepreneurship can help create a supportive environment for new businesses.

Conclusion: To achieve sustainable entrepreneurship in rural areas, a comprehensive approach, including education, financial support, and local policy, is needed. These solutions are necessary to improve economic conditions, preserve cultural identity, and strengthen social solidarity in rural areas, ultimately leading to a resilient and dynamic rural economy.

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1. Introduction

Rural entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical strategy for fostering economic and social development in rural areas. (Liu et al., 2023). However, the success and sustainability of rural businesses are shaped by many factors, among which local culture and values play a pivotal role. Culture, as a collective system of beliefs, values, and norms, can both facilitate and hinder entrepreneurial development (Pang et al., 2022). This influence is especially pronounced in rural contexts where stronger social and cultural structures often dominate rural communities (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Research has consistently demonstrated that culture serves as a key determinant of entrepreneurial behaviours (Fortunato & Alter, 2016). Positive attitudes towards risk-taking, valuing innovation and creativity, and the extent of individualism versus collectivism within society all impact individuals' willingness to start new businesses and achieve success (Hofstede, 1980). For instance, in societies where risk-taking is perceived as a positive value, entrepreneurs are more likely to experiment with new ideas and venture into unfamiliar markets. Conversely, in collectivist cultures, strong social relationships and network support often serve as crucial enablers in the success of rural businesses (Huggins & Thompson, 2014; Wood et al., 2021). Moreover, the interplay between these cultural factors and the existing economic and social structures in rural areas often determines the success or failure of rural businesses. On the other hand, local values can be a source of innovation and creativity in rural entrepreneurship. Indigenous knowledge and local traditions can inspire the creation of unique products and services with market appeal. Such products not only meet local needs but also serve as symbols of cultural identity and regional history. Moreover, preserving local identity and strengthening social cohesion can foster an environment conducive to the growth and success of rural businesses. In this regard, rural entrepreneurs can leverage local resources and capacities, build effective relationships with the local community, and contribute to these areas' sustainable and balanced development. (Bosworth & Turner, 2018; Gaddefors & Anderson, 2019; Hayton et al., 2002; Korsgaard & Tanvig, 2015; Pato & Teixeira, 2016; Thornton et al., 2011). Therefore, a deeper understanding of the impacts of culture and local values on rural entrepreneurship, especially in the current context where rural communities face numerous challenges, such as economic and environmental crises, is of paramount importance. This research investigates how culture and local values can serve as facilitators or

barriers to entrepreneurial development and explore potential strategies to strengthen this process in rural areas.

Despite the increasing significance of rural entrepreneurship in driving economic and social progress in rural areas, there remains a notable gap in our understanding of how local beliefs and values impact the success of rural businesses. Previous research has predominantly focused on rural entrepreneurship's economic and structural aspects, overlooking the pivotal role of culture and social norms in shaping entrepreneurial behaviours. This knowledge gap is particularly conspicuous in regions with specific geographic conditions and environmental challenges, such as the eastern periphery of Zayandeh Rud, which is grappling with a severe drought. The limited comprehension of the intricate interplay between local culture, environmental conditions, and entrepreneurial activities has impeded the formulation of effective strategies to foster sustainable entrepreneurship in these areas. Thus, the primary aim of this study is to comprehensively investigate the influence of cultural factors on the development and sustainability of rural entrepreneurship in the eastern periphery of Zayandeh Rud. The specific objectives of this research are: (1) to identify and examine the local beliefs and values that shape entrepreneurial activities, (2) to assess the role of cultural resilience in the success of rural businesses during crises, (3) to analyse the cultural challenges associated with gender equality in rural entrepreneurship, and (4) to present a unified framework for a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between culture, environment, and entrepreneurship in rural areas. The findings of this research have the potential to bridge the existing theoretical gap in the literature on rural entrepreneurship and offer actionable insights for policymakers and entrepreneurs to advance sustainable rural entrepreneurship.

2. Literature Review

This section will examine the existing literature on rural culture and entrepreneurship. Rural entrepreneurship, as a key factor in the economic development of rural areas, is influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors. Culture acts as a roadmap, shaping the path of entrepreneurship and business success. The shared beliefs, values, and behaviours embedded in culture directly impact the thinking and actions of entrepreneurs, and in a way, they form the DNA of a successful business (Chen et al., 2021).

Given the complexity of culture and its effects on entrepreneurship, this research aims to identify and analyze the existing literature gaps and better understand the in-

teraction between culture and entrepreneurship in rural contexts. Culture is a multifaceted concept with numerous definitions, making establishment of a universally accepted understanding challenging. However, based on existing literature, we can say that culture encompasses a specific group or society's shared knowledge, values, behaviours, and attitudes. This concept includes social patterns, beliefs, institutions, and products of human work and thought (Heyes, 2020), which influence all aspects of human life, including economic activities.

In other words, entrepreneurship, as the process of creating new and innovative businesses that lead to economic growth and job creation, can be a result of individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. As a social factor, culture influences individuals' attitudes and values and, consequently, their willingness to take risks, innovate, and create new businesses (Drakopoulou et al., 2007). Aldrich and Zimmer (2023) emphasised that entrepreneurship is embedded in a social-cultural context. Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson (2007) also highlighted the need to consider social and cultural aspects when analysing entrepreneurial behaviours.

Thornton et al. (2011) showed that social and cultural factors influence the decision to create new businesses. Lüthje & Franke (2003) and Stam & Stel (2011) also demonstrated that entrepreneurial intent is linked to cultural values and that perceived supports and barriers are influential in its formation. Other studies show that individualistic and risk-taking cultures provide a more favourable environment for entrepreneurial growth. However, the impact of culture on entrepreneurship is complex and interacts with economic, political, and social factors.

Hofstede's research (1980), one of the older studies in this field, showed that cultural dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and long-term orientation affect entrepreneurship in society. He argued that these dimensions influence entrepreneurs' motivation, risk tolerance, and the type of businesses created. For example, in societies with high power distance, entrepreneurs need the support and approval of influential individuals to create businesses and may be less inclined to create innovative businesses. Alternatively, entrepreneurs are more focused on personal success in individualistic societies, while in collectivist societies, group success and cooperation are more important (Hofstede, 1980).

Some researchers have specifically examined the role of culture in rural entrepreneurship, and their findings

indicate that culture plays a significant role in rural entrepreneurship and the success of rural businesses. Lose (2023) and Huggins & Thompson (2015) concluded that local beliefs, values, and historical contexts shape entrepreneurial behaviour. Lose (2023) states that cultural elements, including family background and community history, influence entrepreneurship and agricultural business in rural areas. Huggins and Thompson (2015) also found that open and diverse cultures foster entrepreneurial resilience and contribute to economic improvement.

Davidson's research (1995) titled "Culture, Structure, and Regional Levels of Entrepreneurship," showed that even small cultural differences can significantly impact on the number of new companies founded in a region. Similarly, Baqeri et al. (2021) in their study on the relationship between cultural values and entrepreneurial spirit in Khuzestan, concluded that local culture and values significantly impact the success of rural businesses.

Sheihaki Tash et al. (2011a) reported that cultural factors, as defined by Hofstede's dimensions, influence entrepreneurship in knowledge-based ecosystems and that regional culture generally supports entrepreneurial processes. Additionally, Pazaki (2023) in examining the role of human drivers of tourism entrepreneurship in sustainable rural development, found that human and socio-cultural factors, particularly motivational factors, strengthen entrepreneurship in sustainable rural tourism.

Ghambarali et al. (2016) highlighted cultural barriers to agricultural entrepreneurs in Kermanshah, such as a lack of a culture of creativity, an unwillingness to accept failure, negative attitude towards risk and patriarchal culture in society, and parental opposition to daughters' entrepreneurial activities. Afrasiabi et al. (2021) and Fathizadeh et al. (2022) echoed these findings, reporting that cultural barriers, such as hinder entrepreneurship, particularly for women, in regions like Khorasan Razavi.

These studies reveal that the cultural subsystem in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in some Iranian provinces is unsatisfactory for entrepreneurship often acting as a hindrance rather than a support. To address this, a holistic approach considering cultural, institutional, and individual factors is necessary for creating a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem. The research emphasizes that that cultural and social factors play a critical role in shaping the entrepreneurial spirit and that strengthening entrepreneurial culture and social networks can drive rural economic and social development (Moridsadat et al., 2021).

Historical examples, such as Sheikh Baha'i's decree 400 years ago emphasizing culture and ethics in commerce underscores the enduring importance of these factors in fostering successful rural entrepreneurship. This historical perspective offers an inspirational model for strengthening the business culture of rural communities, particularly in regions like Zayandeh Rud (Hosseini Abri, 2009; Maham, 2019). Ultimately, this research aims to examine the cultural factors influencing rural entrepreneurship in the eastern margin of Zayandeh Rud in Isfahan. By doing so, it seeks to enhance our understanding of the interplay between culture and entrepreneurship and provide practical solutions for fostering sustainable rural entrepreneurship.

3. Methodology

3-1- Study Area

The downstream section of the Zayandeh Rud watershed in Isfahan Province, known as the eastern margin of the Zayandeh Rud River, encompasses three counties: Isfahan, Varzaneh, and Herend. This area is divided into five districts and 14 rural districts, and it is home to 133 villages with a total population of 104,607.

With a rich historical background spanning approximately 500 years in utilizing the river's water for agriculture and livestock farming, this region is renowned as one of Iran's agricultural hubs and a centre for water-related activities. However, over the past decade, the region has faced serious challenges due to the drought crisis and a significant decrease in the flow of Zayandeh Rud. This has resulted in a decline in the production capacity of agricultural lands and traditional orchards, leading to widespread unemployment, rural-to-urban migration, and a sharp decline in income levels and welfare in these rural communities.

In such circumstances, the government has turned to developing rural entrepreneurship as a potential solution to address these economic and social challenges. Despite allocating specific budgets and implementing numerous projects, satisfactory results have not been achieved. Studies show that one of the most important barriers to the development of rural entrepreneurship in these areas is the existence of cultural challenges.

These challenges can reinforce norms and beliefs that exacerbate inequalities and consequently lead to an unfair distribution of access to facilities and resources. In other words, cultural beliefs and norms can act as barriers, preventing equal access to opportunities and resources for all members of society.

3-2 Sampling, collecting and analyzing data

Given the research objective to investigate the cultural challenges and their impact on the success and sustainability of rural businesses (rural entrepreneurship) in the study area, this research has adopted a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017). This qualitative method facilitates a deep understanding of cultural challenges and obstacles faced by rural entrepreneurs. Additionally, this method contributes to a better understanding of how cultural norms and beliefs can act as barriers or facilitators to the development of rural businesses.

Qualitative thematic analysis is employed as a suitable tool for a thorough examination of institutional challenges and their consequences for rural entrepreneurship development in the study area. This qualitative analysis provides valuable insights for designing targeted policy to educate, improve and change the local community's behaviours, beliefs, and values, thereby supporting entrepreneurship in these rural areas.

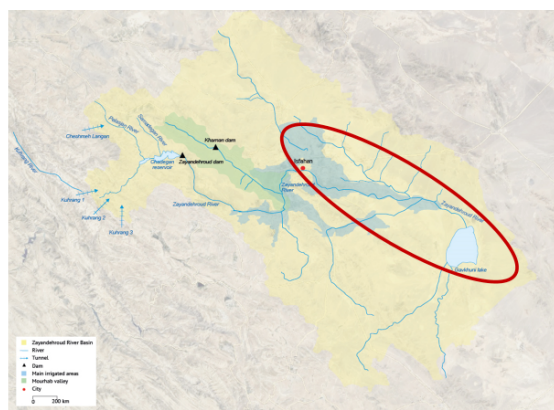


Figure 1. Map of Zayandeh River watershed of Isfahan and its main tributaries. Source: Authors, 1402

At the outset of the study, the researcher conducted a preliminary review of the existing literature to gain an initial understanding and develop theoretical sensitivity regarding the key concepts of rural entrepreneurship, empowerment, and its spatial dimensions. This preliminary review helped to:

1. Identify research gaps,
2. Design interview questions, and
3. Select initial samples.

Familiarity with existing concepts and theories has provided a foundation for conceptualisation and categorisation during data analysis. However, it is important to emphasise that despite this initial review, the researcher has strived to maintain an open mind, avoiding the imposition of pre-existing frameworks. This ensures that new categories and concepts can emerge organically from the data.

In other words, the literature review was used only to develop theoretical sensitivity and not as a rigid theoretical foundation. As new concepts and categories emerged during the data collection and analysis process, the researcher responded promptly by expanding and deepening the relevant literature. This interactive and cyclical process ensures that the research remains adaptive and grounded in the emerging data.

As the analyses progressed and new concepts and relationships surfaced, the research literature was gradually completed and enriched. This approach is fully consistent with the principles of grounded theory, which emphasizes continuous and flexible movement between data and literature (Charmaz, 2017; Radford, 1977; Stebbins, 2006).

Snowball Sampling, also known as chain referral sampling, was employed to identify respondents. This method, is widely used in qualitative research where new participants are identified through existing ones. Qadiri Masoom et al. (2021) argue that snowball sampling is especially suitable in the Iranian context, where cultural and logistical barriers often hinder the direct recruitment of participants.

Given the sensitivity and impact of the research topic, potential respondents, particularly stakeholders, may be hesitant to participate unless they trust the research process. Addressing cultural challenges and their effect on entrepreneurial activities in rural areas requires careful framing of questions to ensure participants feel secure and respected. Interviewees may be cautious, fearing

risks to their personal or professional interests, especially government employees who might worry about revealing sensitive information that could affect their positions.

To overcome these challenges, significant time and effort were invested in building trust with potential respondents. The interview process spanned two months, from late January to late March 2024, involving on-site visits and trips to several villages. Researchers spent extended periods with participants during each visit to foster trust and encourage cooperation.

Most interviews were conducted in person or via phone call to ensure a personal and engaging approach. Initially, government officials were asked to help introduce potential respondents through referral chains. A total of 50 potential participants were approached, of whom 40 agreed to participate.

To achieve robust and unbiased results, participants were selected from a range of roles and responsibilities, including local managers, entrepreneurs, rural entrepreneurs, government managers and staff, small business and rural business trainers and consultants, and rural development professors and researchers. This diverse pool of respondents enriched the study's findings, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of the cultural challenges impacting rural entrepreneurship.

Interviews were conducted with participants either in person at their workplaces or by telephone following scheduled appointments. Potential participants were initially contacted by phone and invited to participate in the study. The interview guide consisted of 14 semi-structured questions focusing on various topics related to the study's objectives. All interviews were audio-recorded except for six respondents who were unwilling to have their voices recorded. The researchers recorded conversations and responses in writing for those who did not want the interview session to be recorded. Data was collected in Persian and then translated into English. Participants were assured that all information provided would remain confidential and would not be shared with third parties.

The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was reached when no new or relevant information emerged and the point of diminishing returns was achieved (Collier, 1975). This stage was reached after conducting 40 interviews, leading the research team to conclude that a satisfactory understanding of the study's subject had been obtained.

Data collection took place from early February to late April 2024. The comprehensive and systematic approach ensured that the information gathered was thorough and credible. Table 1 shows the participants’ descriptive information.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with an initial review of the recorded interview transcripts. These recordings were listened to multiple times to develop a deep familiarity with the underlying concepts and gain a deeper understanding of the themes and patterns within the data. This preliminary stage allowed the researchers to become acquainted with the context and nuances of the interviews, identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

Following this, the recorded conversations were transcribed into written text. This transcription process was conducted with meticulous attention to detail to accurately reflect any changes in tone and sentiment expressed by the respondents. To ensure accuracy, the transcripts were thoroughly reviewed multiple times from start to finish. This stage also enabled researchers to identify initial patterns and key themes, summarising the interviews and noting the underlying flow of each conversation.

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically analyse the data, allowing researchers to identify the main patterns and themes. The transcribed data was carefully examined word by word by through repeated readings, which facilitated deeper engagement with the content and the extraction of significant themes.

To support the analysis, MAXQDA version 20 software was used to code the data for thematic analysis systematically. This software allowed researchers to organize and code the data systematically, identify patterns and connections between different themes and Facilitate deeper, more nuanced analysis of the data. The use of MAXQDA

enhanced the efficiency and precision of the coding process, contributing to a richer understanding of the data.

By combining the results from the manual review of transcripts and the systematic coding in MAXQDA, researchers identified the main themes and patterns within the data. This comprehensive approach significantly enriched the research’s theoretical and practical implications. The multiple stages of review, combined with the methodological rigor of thematic analysis and software-aided coding, strengthened the credibility and validity of the results (Rädiker, 2023). These steps ensured that the findings were robust, well-supported, and reflective of the data’s complexity and depth (Rädiker, 2023).

4. Findings

Culture, defined as a combination of beliefs, values, norms, and behaviours within a society, plays a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurship. It not only influences individuals’ attitudes towards entrepreneurship and risk-taking but also significantly impacts the success or failure of rural businesses. In rural communities, local culture, particularly in social and economic contexts, can create specific barriers or opportunities for entrepreneurs. The qualitative data analysis results indicate that adaptive resilience and flexibility are fundamental factors for the sustainability and success of rural entrepreneurship. Moreover, gender inequality challenges and cultural barriers to women’s participation in entrepreneurial activities have been identified as significant obstacles. Conversely, strengthening and preserving local identity and indigenous resources can foster innovation and sustainable development, while also promoting social cohesion and preserving the cultural identity of rural communities. To visually represent these findings, Figure 2 displays the themes, categories, and concepts derived from the MAXQDA software, effectively illustrating the relationships between cultural elements and entrepreneurial success.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Interviewees

Stakeholders/ interviewees	Number	Average Education	Gender percentage of beneficiaries		Average Years of Employment	Average interview time (minutes)
			Men%	Female%		
Experts and specialists in entrepreneurship and small and rural businesses	10	Masters	50	50	16.4	65
Managers and Employees of the Agricultural Jihad Organization	10	Masters	50	50	22.5	71
Researchers and professors in the field of rural development	8	P.H.D	50	50	19.3	73
Village managers	6	Bachelor’s degree	100	0	7.7	70
Rural entrepreneurs	6	diploma	40	60	10.4	80



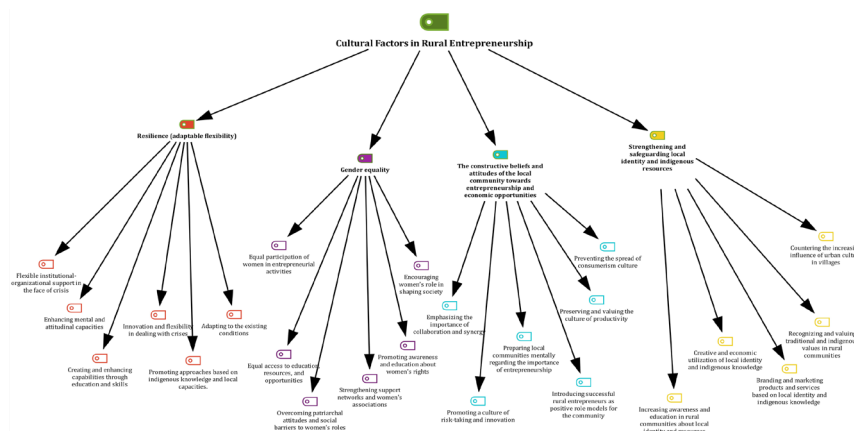


Figure 2. Output of themes, categories and concepts from MAXQDA software



Table 2 further enhances this by presenting a comprehensive matrix of cultural theme codes pertinent to rural entrepreneurial studies. It classifies significant themes, including resilience, gender equality, and the reinforcement of local identity, and elaborates on specific concepts within each classification. This organized summary highlights the diverse impact of cultural factors on entrepreneurship in rural settings, underscoring the significance of education, support networks, and community involvement in nurturing a successful entrepreneurial environment.

4-1- Resilience (Adaptive Flexibility)

This research indicates that resilience and adaptive flexibility are key factors in the sustainability and success of rural entrepreneurship. This concept aligns with the theory of social-ecological resilience, which emphasizes the ability of social and ecological systems to cope with change and crises. In the context of rural entrepreneurship, resilience refers to the ability of entrepreneurs and rural communities to cope with multiple challenges, including climate change, economic fluctuations, and social transformations. One small business and rural business trainer highlights an important point:

“In critical conditions or, better said, in conditions where entrepreneurship in villages is more risky, increased resilience can play a role in creating sustainability in rural entrepreneurship. This resilience can be in the form of support, such as microfinance funds, capacity building through education and skills, and also increasing mental and attitudinal capacities.”

This perspective aligns with the concept of resilience capacity building, which emphasises the importance of developing skills, resources, and supportive structures to increase resilience (Aksha & Emrich, 2020; Gil-Ri-

vas & Kilmer, 2016) within an ecologically grounded framework, key principles, and recommendations for community-level intervention to build community capacity and promote disaster resilience. Method: Using an ecological framework, this article describes community resilience and related constructs and key principles for community-level disaster preparedness and response. Results: Current research suggests the importance of focusing on bolstering resources that promote wellness and facilitate individual and community resilience in the face of disaster. Conclusion: We advocate for using an ecological framework grounded in such values as collaboration, social justice, empowerment, and an appreciation of diversity to guide disaster work with communities. We highlight the need to: (a. In this regard, microfinance funds can serve as a financial mechanism to support entrepreneurs during crises, while education and skills development can increase entrepreneurs’ capacity to adapt to changing conditions. Another expert points to the importance of adaptation and the role of government in this process:

“Rural people in this region first need to adapt to these conditions, and their resilience to problems must increase. This is the government’s responsibility. One way to increase resilience in this region can be entrepreneurship.”

This view aligns with the concept of adaptive resilience, which emphasizes the ability of systems to change and adapt to new conditions (Bastiaansen et al., 2020) quantifying ecosystem resilience is an important challenge. Historically, resilience has been defined via models that do not take spatial effects into account. These systems can only adapt via uniform adjustments. In reality, however, the response is not necessarily uniform, and can lead to the formation of (self-organised. In this context,

entrepreneurship can serve as an adaptation strategy for rural communities in the face of economic and environmental challenges. The government’s role in this process can include creating supportive policy frameworks, providing necessary training, and facilitating access to resources. The experiences of rural entrepreneurs also provide valuable insights into resilience. One entrepreneur says,

“We rural people, especially rural producers, have struggled with so many problems that our resilience and tolerance threshold have increased.”

This statement reflects the concept of experiential resilience, which emphasizes the importance of past ex-

periences in shaping resilience capacity (Giacaman, 2020). However, this entrepreneur also emphasizes the need for government support in specific situations such as drought, indicating that resilience is a shared process between the community and supporting institutions. Another rural entrepreneur provides a notable example of resilience and adaptive flexibility:

“When the drought started and no water reached the downstream of Zayandeh Rud, we waited for a while to see what the government would do. When we heard no news and saw that our wives and children were going hungry, we started cultivating cold-water fish with this salty water, which has a high salinity, and now the products of the villages in this region are being exported.”

Table 2. Extracted Matrix of Cultural Theme Codes for Rural Entrepreneurial Studies (MAXQDA)

theme	category	Concepts	
Cultural Factors in Rural Entrepreneurship	Resilience (adaptable flexibility)	Creating and enhancing capabilities through education and skills	
		Flexible institutional-organizational support in the face of crisis	
		Enhancing mental and attitudinal capacities	
		Adapting to the existing conditions	
	Gender equality	Strengthening and safeguarding local identity and Indigenous resources	Promoting approaches based on indigenous knowledge and local capacities.
			Innovation and flexibility in dealing with crises
			Facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experiences
			Equal participation of women in entrepreneurial activities
			Overcoming patriarchal attitudes and social barriers to women’s roles
			Equal access to education, resources, and opportunities
Strengthening support networks and women’s associations			
Encouraging women’s role in shaping society			
Promoting awareness and education about women’s rights			
Countering the increasing influence of urban culture in villages			
The constructive beliefs and attitudes of the local community towards entrepreneurship and economic opportunities	The constructive beliefs and attitudes of the local community towards entrepreneurship and economic opportunities	Recognizing and valuing traditional and Indigenous values in rural communities	
		Creative and economic utilization of local identity and Indigenous knowledge	
		Increasing awareness and education in rural communities about local identity and resources	
		Branding and marketing products and services based on local identity and Indigenous knowledge	
		Preserving and valuing the culture of productivity	
		Preventing the spread of consumerism culture	
		Preparing local communities mentally regarding the importance of entrepreneurship	
		Introducing successful rural entrepreneurs as positive role models for the community	
		Promoting a culture of risk-taking and innovation	
		Emphasizing the importance of collaboration and synergy	

This example clearly shows how resilience and innovation can change a challenge (drought and salty water) into an opportunity (cold-water fish farming). This example aligns with the concept of transformative resilience, which emphasizes the ability of systems to make fundamental and positive changes in the face of crises (Gao & Geng, 2024). Figure 3 presents a comprehensive and dynamic model of factors influencing resilience and flexibility in rural entrepreneurship and their impact on rural economic development. This model effectively illustrates that resilience and flexibility in rural entrepreneurship is a multidimensional process encompassing individual, social, and institutional elements. At the center of this model is “Resilience and Flexibility in Rural Entrepreneurship,” which is directly influenced by six key factors: educational programs, flexible financial mechanisms, social networks, supportive policies, approaches based on indigenous knowledge, and early warning systems and crisis management. This central concept forms the core of the model, emphasizing its crucial role in shaping the sustainability and success of rural entrepreneurial ventures. The model demonstrates how these factors interact with and reinforce each other. For instance, educational programs can enhance the adaptive and problem-solving skills of rural entrepreneurs, which in turn can lead to more effective utilization of flexible financial mechanisms and social networks. Similarly, supportive policies can create an enabling environment for the establishment and strengthening of these mechanisms and networks. Approaches based on indigenous knowledge can contribute to the development of innovative solutions tailored to local conditions. Early warning systems and crisis management help entrepreneurs anticipate and prepare for future challenges. The interconnectedness of these elements highlights the need for a holistic approach to building resilience in rural entrepreneurship. A significant aspect of this model is the bidirectional relationship between resilience and flexibility in rural entrepreneurship and rural economic development. This indicates that enhancing resilience not only contrib-

utes to the sustainability of rural businesses but can also lead to economic growth and sustainable development in rural areas. Furthermore, the model emphasizes that strengthening resilience requires long-term commitment, intersectoral cooperation, and continuous learning from past and present experiences. This comprehensive and systematic approach effectively demonstrates how implementing various solutions can strengthen resilience and flexibility in rural entrepreneurship, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development of rural areas. The model provides a valuable framework for policymakers and stakeholders to understand the complex dynamics of rural entrepreneurship resilience and to design effective interventions to support it.

4-2- Gender Equality

The results of this research indicate that gender equality is a fundamental challenge in the development and sustainability of rural entrepreneurship. Despite progress made in recent years, significant cultural and structural barriers still hinder women’s equal participation in entrepreneurial activities in rural areas. These barriers are rooted in traditional beliefs, patriarchal attitudes, and social limitations that restrict women’s opportunities to enter the business world and develop entrepreneurial skills. One of the most important aspects of this inequality is the limited access of rural women to the resources and opportunities necessary for entrepreneurship. These limitations include unequal access to education, financial credit, technology, and social-economic networks (Jaiyeola & Adeyeye, 2021; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005) For example, one rural business expert stated:

“In many villages, due to a patriarchal culture, women are not allowed to work, and even if they are allowed to work, they are not allowed to attend entrepreneurship training classes or take out loans for this purpose.”

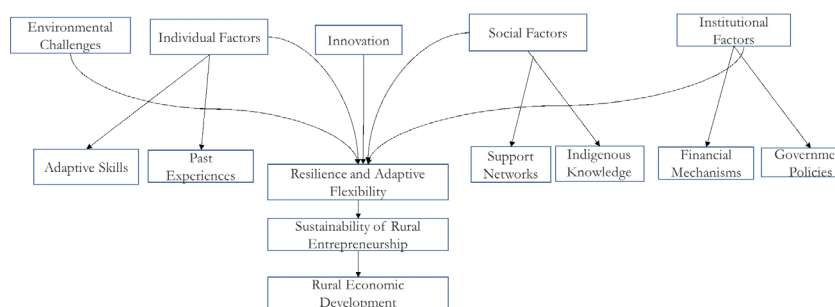


Figure 3. Analysis of the interactions of factors affecting resilience and flexibility in rural entrepreneurship and their impact on rural economic development



This inequality in access to resources severely limits women’s ability to start and develop successful businesses. In addition, the social and cultural attitudes prevailing in rural communities play a significant role in perpetuating this inequality. In many cases, women’s entrepreneurship is considered a secondary and less important activity compared to family and household responsibilities. This view leads to a lack of sufficient support from family and society and a decrease in women’s self-confidence to enter the entrepreneurial field. One agricultural jihad manager stated in this regard:

“Imposing restrictions on women and the existence of patriarchy in some villages is itself one of the barriers to entrepreneurship.”

However, evidence of positive changes in this area can also be seen. Some interviewees mentioned an increase in women’s participation in economic activities and entrepreneurship in some villages. For example, one rural female entrepreneur said:

“It’s not like it used to be. Women in the village are starting their own businesses and have the support of their men.”

Figure 4 presents a comprehensive framework illustrating the complex interplay of factors affecting gender equality in rural entrepreneurship and their impact on sustainable rural development. This model’s core is “Gender Equality in Rural Entrepreneurship,” which is directly influenced by five key action areas: support policies, cultural change, support networks, monitoring mechanisms, and research studies. This central concept is crucial, forming the foundation for transformative change in rural economies and societies. The model effectively demonstrates how these various elements are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to addressing gender

inequality in rural entrepreneurship. The framework emphasizes the importance of targeted interventions across multiple domains. Support policies, including access to credit, specialized training, and consulting services, directly impact women’s access to resources and opportunities. Cultural change, promoted through education and awareness-raising, aims to transform traditional attitudes towards women’s roles. The model illustrates how this cultural shift both influences and is influenced by improvements in gender equality, creating a positive feedback loop. Support networks and associations for rural women entrepreneurs facilitate knowledge exchange and mutual support, contributing to skill development and increased participation in entrepreneurial activities. Monitoring mechanisms ensure the fair implementation of gender equality policies, while ongoing research informs evidence-based policymaking, both of which are crucial for sustainable progress.

Importantly, the model demonstrates the broader impacts of improved gender equality in rural entrepreneurship. It shows how empowering women and creating equal opportunities can lead to increased productivity, innovation, and overall economic growth in rural areas. These outcomes are presented as direct results of gender equality initiatives, underscoring the economic imperative of addressing gender disparities. The ultimate goal of sustainable rural development is shown to be influenced by these economic improvements and directly linked to gender equality. This visual representation effectively captures the multi-faceted nature of gender equality in rural entrepreneurship and emphasizes that it is not just a moral imperative but also a crucial factor for economic growth and sustainable development in rural areas. By illustrating these interconnections, the model provides a compelling argument for prioritizing efforts to remove existing barriers and create a supportive environment for rural women entrepreneurs in rural development policies.

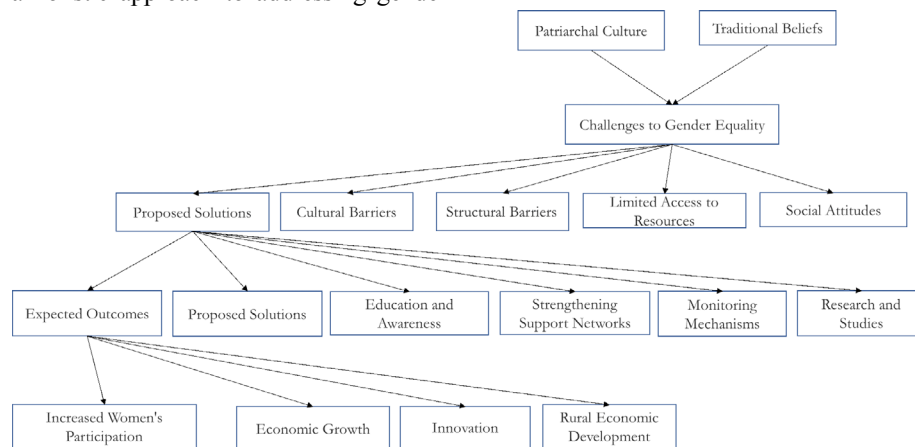


Figure 4. Examination of the Interactions Among Factors Influencing Gender Equality and Their Impact on Women’s Participation in Sustainable Rural Development

4-3- Strengthening and Preserving Local Identity and Indigenous Resources

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of strengthening and preserving local identity and indigenous resources in promoting the development and sustainability of rural entrepreneurship (Figure 4). These factors serve as valuable resources for fostering innovation, creating economic value, and enhancing rural communities' social cohesion and cultural identity. However, the research indicates that these resources are often undervalued and not fully recognized for their potential. One of the primary challenges identified is the growing influence of urban culture, which has resulted in a diminishing appreciation for traditional and indigenous values among rural residents. As an illustration, a rural business expert expressed the following concern:

“Urban culture has penetrated the village and this has caused villagers to distance themselves from rural life and they are no longer willing to do many of the things they used to do.”

This shift in attitude can lead to the loss of potential opportunities for entrepreneurship based on indigenous resources and knowledge. In addition, policymakers and support institutions have also identified the lack of sufficient attention to the economic and entrepreneurial value of local identity and indigenous knowledge as a serious obstacle. One agricultural jihad employee stated,

“Neither local people nor urban people or organizations pay attention to local identity and indigenous knowledge, and sometimes it is considered worthless or overlooked.”

This lack of attention can lead to the loss of valuable opportunities to develop innovative and sustainable businesses based on indigenous resources. However, there is also evidence of growing awareness of the importance of preserving and valuing local identity and indigenous resources in the development of rural entrepreneurship. Some interviewees referred to the untapped potential of these resources to create added value and develop innovative businesses. For example, one village head said:

“If the people of the village consider their local identity, indigenous knowledge, and what they have as traditional assets as a valuable asset, they may be able to convert them into added value.”

Figure 5 illustrates the complex interaction between factors influencing the strengthening of local identity and indigenous resources in rural economic development and entrepreneurship. This conceptual model effectively demonstrates how various cultural, economic,

and policy factors are interconnected and influence each other. At the center of this model is “Strengthening local identity and indigenous resources,” highlighting the pivotal importance of this factor in rural entrepreneurship development. This central factor is influenced on one side by “Awareness and education of the local community” and on the other by “Targeted support policies.” The model shows that increasing awareness and education in the local community can lead to “Valuing indigenous resources and knowledge,” which in turn impacts “Creativity and innovation in utilizing indigenous resources.” This process can result in the “Creation of unique products and services.” On the other hand, targeted support policies can enhance “Collaboration between educational, research, and industrial institutions” and establish “Platforms for knowledge and experience exchange.” These factors ultimately contribute to the “Branding and marketing of indigenous products and services.” A notable aspect of this model is the bidirectional relationship between most factors, indicating the dynamic and complex nature of the rural entrepreneurship development process. For instance, the “Creation of unique products and services” can lead to “Increased income and employment,” which in turn can reinforce “Strengthening local identity and indigenous resources.” Similarly, “Branding and marketing of indigenous products and services” can contribute to both “Increased income and employment” and “Strengthening social cohesion and cultural identity.” This model effectively illustrates how strengthening local identity and creatively utilizing indigenous resources can contribute to sustainable and balanced development in rural areas.

4-4- Community Beliefs and Attitudes Towards Entrepreneurship and Economic Opportunities

This research indicates that the community's constructive beliefs and attitudes towards entrepreneurship and economic opportunities play a vital role in the formation, development, and sustainability of entrepreneurial activities in rural areas. This socio-cultural factor affects individuals' motivation and desire to enter the entrepreneurial field and influences the level of community support for entrepreneurs and their success (Figure 5) (Naminse & Zhuang, 2018). However, the research findings indicate the existence of significant challenges in this area that require serious attention and action. One of the most significant challenges identified is the shift in the rural community's attitude from a production-oriented culture to a consumer-oriented culture. This shift in attitude, rooted in broader socio-economic changes, has led to a decline in the value and importance of productive and entrepreneurial activities in the eyes of the rural community. For example, one rural business expert stated:

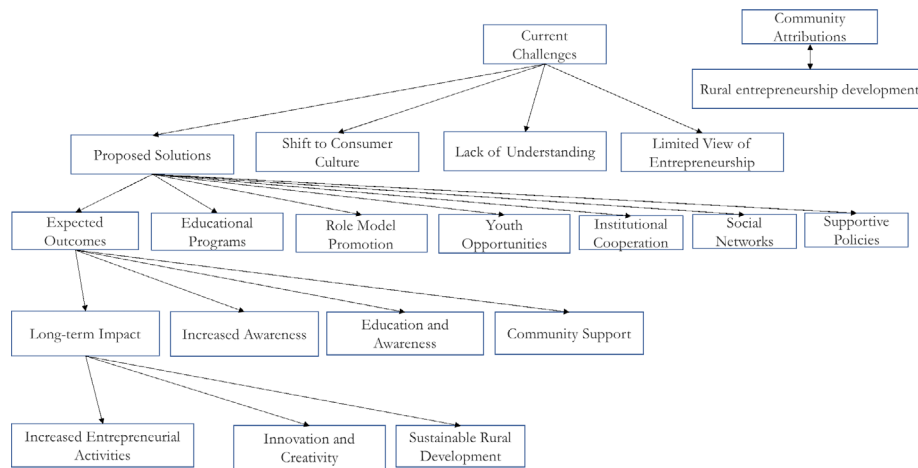


Figure 5. Analysis of interactions among factors influencing the strengthening of local identity and indigenous JSRD resources in rural economic development and entrepreneurship

“Our villagers have turned from a production-oriented culture to a consumer-oriented culture, and with this change in attitude, creating businesses, production, and entrepreneurship in the region’s villages is a difficult and arduous task.”

This shift in attitude can serve as a serious obstacle to rural entrepreneurship development. In addition, a lack of proper understanding of the concept and importance of entrepreneurship in the economic and social development of villages has also been identified as a major challenge. In many cases, entrepreneurship is simply considered a simple economic activity or a way to create employment, without considering its innovative and value-creating dimensions. This limited view can lead to insufficient community support for innovative and risky ideas. One entrepreneur stated in this regard:

“Subcultures, lack of social responsibility, and the incorrect attitude of rural people (a mistaken view of business and confusing it with self-employment) are important reasons for the instability of rural entrepreneurship.”

However, there is evidence of positive changes in the rural community’s attitude towards entrepreneurship. Some interviewees mentioned an increase in awareness and interest in entrepreneurship, especially among rural youth. For example, one local manager stated:

“Changing the beliefs and attitudes of rural people towards entrepreneurship and preparing the minds of local communities for entrepreneurship will be one of the main drivers for creating this process in the villages of the region.”

The conceptual model of Figure 6 shows that the development of rural entrepreneurship is a complex and multidimensional process that begins with the challenges of the rural entrepreneur and the attitudes of the community. Current challenges, especially the shift towards a consumer culture and a limited understanding of entrepreneurship, are the starting point of this process. These challenges show that broader socio-economic changes have significantly affected the attitudes of rural communities towards productive and entrepreneurial activities. Understanding these challenges is critical to designing effective solutions. This model shows that overcoming these challenges requires multiple and integrated solutions. Training and providing successful role models, along with creating opportunities for young people and strengthening institutional cooperation, are key strategies to initiate change. These solutions are designed to create a positive ecosystem that includes raising awareness, changing attitudes, and community support. Importantly, this model emphasizes the importance of supportive policies and continuous awareness raising, suggesting that this process requires ongoing effort and systematic support.

Finally, this model shows that the long-term effects of this process include increasing entrepreneurial activities, innovation and sustainable development. These results show that changing society’s attitude towards entrepreneurship can have wide consequences for the economic and social development of rural areas. It is important to note that this model does not depict a simple linear relationship, but rather a dynamic and iterative process in which each stage can influence the others. This highlights the importance of a systemic and integrated approach to rural entrepreneurship development.

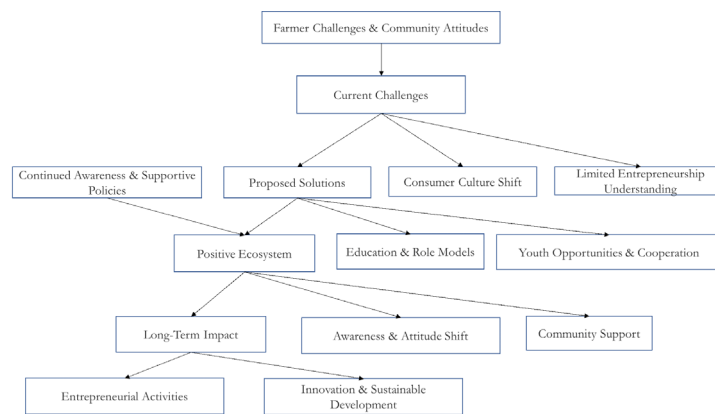


Figure 6. Analyzing the interactions between the factors influencing the beliefs and attitudes of the society towards entrepreneurship and its impact on rural development



5. Discussion

This research has explored the intricate interplay of cultural factors influencing rural entrepreneurship, revealing a multifaceted landscape where resilience, gender equality, local identity preservation, and community attitudes are deeply intertwined. These elements are fundamental to the success and sustainability of entrepreneurial activities in rural areas.

The comprehensive conceptual model developed from this study illustrates that these cultural factors - resilience and adaptive flexibility, gender equality, local identity and indigenous resources, and community beliefs and attitudes - are not isolated elements but interconnected components that collectively shape the rural entrepreneurship ecosystem. Each factor is influenced by the others, creating a dynamic system that impacts rural entrepreneurship development and sustainable rural development.

Adaptive resilience and flexibility emerged as crucial for rural entrepreneurs who face economic and environmental challenges. Resilience is enhanced through government support, capacity building, and leveraging indigenous knowledge. Despite progress, gender equality remains a significant challenge, with cultural and social barriers limiting women's equal participation in entrepreneurial activities. Addressing these barriers requires targeted policies and efforts to change social attitudes, which can, in turn, positively influence other cultural factors. The preservation and strengthening of local identity and indigenous resources emerged as a key enabler for innovation and entrepreneurship sustainability. This aspect is closely tied to community attitudes, as valuing traditional knowledge can shift perspectives towards a more entrepreneurial mindset. The research highlighted

that community beliefs and attitudes significantly impact the formation and development of entrepreneurial activities, emphasizing the need for educational and cultural measures to promote a supportive entrepreneurial environment. Importantly, the model reveals that external factors, including government policies, economic conditions, and environmental challenges, significantly influence both cultural factors and rural entrepreneurship development. This understanding underscores the need for holistic, context-specific approaches to fostering rural entrepreneurship.

The findings of this study align with previous research by Davidson (1995), Baqeri et al. (2021), Luz (2023), and Huggins and Thompson (2015), confirming the significant impact of cultural factors on entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors in rural areas. However, this research extends beyond, demonstrating these cultural factors' complex, interconnected nature and their collective impact on rural entrepreneurship (Figure 7).

Considering these findings, we recommend prioritizing comprehensive strategies that simultaneously address all identified cultural factors. This includes:

Training programs to enhance resilience and skills

Promoting gender equality and empowering women in entrepreneurship.

Preserving local identity, and supporting indigenous resources

Fostering positive community attitudes towards entrepreneurship.

Additionally, financial support and policy development should also be tailored to local capacities and cultural

contexts. This integrated approach, will strengthen rural entrepreneurship and contribute to sustainable rural development, improving economic and social conditions while preserving cultural identity and enhancing social cohesion. Future research should delve deeper into interconnections between these cultural factors, potentially through longitudinal studies and cross-regional comparisons, to develop more nuanced and effective strategies for rural entrepreneurship development.

Based on the findings and limitations of this research, several avenues for future studies are proposed to expand and refine our understanding of rural entrepreneurship dynamics:

1. Comparative studies across different rural regions could enhance understanding of how local conditions such as cultural, economic, and environmental factors—affect the development of rural entrepreneurship. Comparing regions with different levels of infrastructure, access to resources, and cultural norms would offer valuable insights into the variability of entrepreneurial opportunities.

2. Mixed-methods research design could provide a more comprehensive picture of the rural entrepreneurship landscape. This approach would allow for the gathering of robust statistical data alongside in-depth, context-specific qualitative insights, leading to a more well-rounded understanding of the entrepreneurial landscape.

3. Longitudinal Studies would enable researchers to track changes in entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors over time, shedding light on the long-term effects of interventions, policy changes, and shifts in social or cultural norms. This research could provide valuable data

on how rural entrepreneurs adapt to changing circumstances and what factors contribute to sustained entrepreneurial success.

4. A more focused exploration of specific demographic groups, such as rural women, youth, or ethnic minorities, could offer critical insights into the unique challenges and opportunities these groups face in rural entrepreneurship. Understanding the intersectionality of cultural, social, and economic barriers could inform targeted policies and support programs to foster inclusive and equitable entrepreneurship.

5. A detailed investigation into the relationship between government policies, support programs on rural entrepreneurship success could reveal how effectively these initiatives contribute to sustainable business development. This research could also identify gaps in policy implementation and suggest improvements to enhance the impact of governmental support for rural entrepreneurs.

6. Investigating the role of new technologies, particularly digital innovations, could provide fresh perspectives on the future of rural entrepreneurship. Understanding how digital tools can facilitate access to markets, improve efficiency, and foster innovation in rural areas would be particularly relevant in the context of digital transformation and smart agriculture.

These proposed research directions aim to contribute to a more nuanced and actionable understanding of the factors influencing rural entrepreneurship. By exploring these themes further, researchers can help develop more targeted strategies for fostering entrepreneurship in rural areas, ultimately driving sustainable development and improving economic and social conditions.

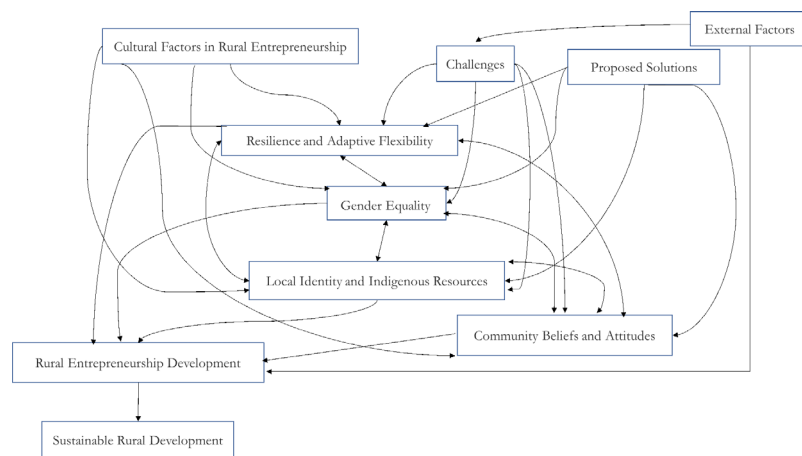


Figure 7. An Integrated Conceptual Model of the Interactions of Cultural Factors Affecting the Development of Rural Entrepreneurship

6- Theoretical Implications of the Research

This research on rural entrepreneurship in the eastern margin of Zayandeh Rud has significant theoretical implications in the field of entrepreneurship studies and rural development. The first and most important implication is the development of the concept of “adaptive resilience” in the context of rural entrepreneurship. This concept, which goes beyond the traditional understanding of resilience as simply resisting economic shocks, refers to the ability of rural entrepreneurs to adapt to environmental, economic, and social changes. This finding contributes to the expansion of existing theories in the field of business resilience and provides a framework for a better understanding of the dynamics of entrepreneurship in rural environments.

The second theoretical implication emphasizes the need to integrate gender theories with rural entrepreneurship studies. This research shows that gender inequalities in access to resources and opportunities significantly impact the dynamics of entrepreneurship in rural areas. This highlights the need to develop new theoretical frameworks that specifically address the intersection of gender, rurality, and entrepreneurship.

Additionally, this research contributes to the expansion of social capital theory in the context of rural entrepreneurship, emphasizing the importance of preserving and valuing local identity and indigenous resources in rural entrepreneurs’ success.

The third theoretical implication is the development of institutional theory in rural entrepreneurship studies. The findings of this research show that local community beliefs and attitudes towards entrepreneurship play a significant role in shaping the institutional environment for entrepreneurial activities. This highlights the need to pay more attention to the role of informal and cultural institutions in rural entrepreneurship studies and can lead to the development of more comprehensive theories in this area.

The fourth theoretical implication is the presentation of a unified framework for studying rural entrepreneurship. By identifying four key factors (resilience, gender equality, local identity, and community attitudes), this research provides a comprehensive framework for studying rural entrepreneurship. This framework can serve as a basis for the development of more comprehensive theories in the field of rural entrepreneurship and contribute to the expansion of the concept of “place-based entrepreneurship.” This concept shows how the specific

characteristics of a region (such as natural resources, local culture, and environmental challenges) influence the entrepreneurial process.

Finally, the fifth theoretical implication of this research emphasizes the need to integrate sustainable development theories with rural entrepreneurship studies. The findings show that the success of rural entrepreneurship depends not only on economic factors but also on environmental sustainability and social cohesion. This highlights the need to develop theoretical frameworks that simultaneously consider rural entrepreneurship’s economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

In summary, by providing new insights into the dynamics of rural entrepreneurship, this research sets the stage for developing more comprehensive and contextually relevant theories in rural areas.

7- Practical Implications of the Research

This research on rural entrepreneurship in the eastern margin of Zayandeh Rud has significant practical implications for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and rural communities.

The first and most important practical implication is the need to develop training and support programs to increase the resilience of rural entrepreneurs. The findings of this research show that entrepreneurs who can adapt to changing environmental and economic conditions have achieved greater success. For example, an entrepreneur who was able to change their activity from traditional agriculture to cold-water fish farming using salty water is an example of this resilience. Based on this, rural development organizations can:

design and implement special training programs to strengthen rural entrepreneurs’ adaptive, risk management, and innovation skills.

create financial support funds to assist entrepreneurs during crises (such as droughts) can help increase their resilience.

The second practical implication is the need to adopt active policies to promote gender equality in rural entrepreneurship. This research showed that rural women face multiple barriers in accessing entrepreneurial resources and opportunities. Specifically, in some villages, women are not allowed to attend entrepreneurship training classes or receive business loans. To address this challenge, policymakers can take the following practical steps:

(1) Allocate specific quotas for women in rural entrepreneurship support and credit programs, (2) conduct awareness-raising campaigns in villages to change traditional attitudes towards women's work,

(3) establish counseling centers and special support for rural women entrepreneurs,

(4) encourage and support the formation of rural women's cooperatives.

These measures can help increase women's participation in entrepreneurial activities and improve the economic situation of rural families.

The third practical implication is the importance of preserving, strengthening, and upholding local identity and indigenous resources in the development of rural entrepreneurship. This research showed that entrepreneurs who have used indigenous knowledge and local traditions in producing their products have been able to produce unique products that are attractive to the market. Based on this, the following practical measures are suggested:

(1) creating programs to record and document indigenous knowledge and local traditions in each rural area,

(2) holding festivals and exhibitions of local products to introduce and promote these products, (3) providing financial and support incentives for entrepreneurs who use indigenous resources and knowledge in their businesses,

(4) developing rural tourism programs focused on introducing local culture and products.

These measures can help preserve the cultural identity of villages and at the same time create new economic opportunities.

The fourth practical implication is the need to change the constructive attitude of the local community towards entrepreneurship and economic opportunities. The findings of this research show that in some villages, a change in attitude from consumer culture to a production and entrepreneurial culture has led to increased community support for entrepreneurs. To promote this constructive change in attitude, the following practical measures are suggested:

(1) conducting training workshops and outreach programs in rural schools and mosques to familiarize young

people and families with the concept and importance of entrepreneurship,

(2) introducing and honoring successful rural entrepreneurs as role models in local media,

(3) establishing innovation and entrepreneurship centers in rural areas to promote a culture of entrepreneurship,

(4) organizing competitions and startup events specifically for rural people. These measures can help create a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurship in rural areas.

This research's fifth and final practical implication is the need to adopt a comprehensive and sustainable approach to rural entrepreneurship development. The findings show that the success of rural entrepreneurship depends not only on economic factors but also on environmental sustainability and social cohesion. Based on this, it is suggested that policymakers and rural development planners take the following actions:

(1) developing rural entrepreneurship development programs that consider economic, social, and environmental dimensions simultaneously,

(2) providing special incentives for environmentally friendly businesses that comply with the principles of sustainable development,

(3) creating platforms for cooperation between entrepreneurs, universities, and government organizations to develop innovative solutions for rural challenges,

(4) developing comprehensive evaluation indicators to measure the impact of entrepreneurship programs on rural sustainable development.

This integrated approach can lead to the creation of more sustainable and locally adapted businesses.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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