

Original Article

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Investigating the role of social justice perception on citizen participation: the mediating role of trust in city councils (case study: Babol)

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of perceived social justice on citizen participation, with a focus on the mediating role of trust in city councils in Babol. The research is applied in terms of purpose and uses a descriptive-correlational survey approach in its methodology. The main variables include perceived social justice, with its distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions, trust in city councils, and citizen participation. The entire population of Babol during the second half of 2017–2018 formed the statistical population. A sample of 368 individuals was selected through multistage cluster sampling followed by simple random sampling. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires, with reliability confirmed by Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7. Data analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling in LISREL, along with descriptive analyses in SPSS. The findings showed that perceived social justice does not have a direct significant effect on citizen participation ($\beta = 0.05$, $p > 0.05$), but significantly enhances trust in city councils ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), which in turn considerably increases citizen participation ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, trust in city councils fully mediates the relationship between perceived social justice and citizen participation ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). Overall, the results suggest that enhancing public trust in city councils can be an effective way to promote citizen participation by improving perceptions of social justice.

Keywords

Citizen Participation
Mediating Role
Perceived Social Justice
Social Justice
Trust in City Councils

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, with the growing importance of citizens' roles in governance and the expansion of democratic systems, the concept of citizen participation has become a central theme in political, social, and urban management studies. Today, the right of people to determine their own destiny is regarded as a fundamental principle in democratic systems worldwide (Azadi & Sadeghi, 2023). Citizen participation is a process in which all social groups take part in various stages of social and local development, thereby mobilizing their capacities to advance collective goals (Izadi & Akrami, 2015). The active involvement of citizens in urban decision-making and planning is a crucial factor in achieving sustainable development and enhancing the quality of local governance. Therefore, identifying the factors that can fortify citizen participation in local arenas is particularly important for urban administrators and policymakers in local governance (Pirbhabai & Rahmani, 2017).

From a theoretical perspective, citizen participation—based on Lewin's (1948) view—is defined as part of the broader process of social change in which individuals actively engage in collective decision-making and action (Zahedi & Mortazavi, 2010). Accordingly, participation can be understood as a process through which all members of society take part in decision-making, planning, and implementation of affairs. In modern models of urban management, citizen participation is grounded in three components: cognitive and emotional involvement, contribution to achieving group goals, and a sense of responsibility toward the outcomes. In this regard, Akbari and Amirmohammadi (2011) identify four key indicators for measuring citizen participation: participation in goal-setting, participation in decision-making, participation in problem-solving, and participation in social change.

Within Iran's system of local governance, Islamic City Councils play a pivotal role in realizing citizen participation. According to Article 100 of the Constitution and the Law on the Formation, Duties, and Election of Islamic Councils (1996), these councils, elected by the public, are responsible for supervising urban affairs and participating in local decision-making. However, empirical studies indicate that the mere existence of councils does not necessarily result in higher participation; rather, citizens' trust in the councils is a decisive factor in their effectiveness (Mehdawi et al., 2014).

Theoretically, the concept of trust, as one of the foundations of social and political interaction, occupies a prominent place within Portes' (1998) social capital theory. Trust is viewed as a form of social capital that facilitates effective citizen engagement in public affairs (Putnam, 1998). The literature identifies three core components of trust: competence, benevolence, and integrity. Taken together, these shape the basis of citizens' trust in public institutions, including city councils (Alvani & Danaeifard, 2001; Ahmadi & Bazrafshan, 2013). In other words, the more citizens perceive municipal institutions as transparent, accountable, and benevolent, the more likely they are to participate in local decision-making.

Alongside trust, the concept of social justice is among the foundational theories of social sciences, exerting significant influence on citizens' attitudes and behaviors (Camgoz & Karapinar, 2011). Justice theories—such as Adams' (1965) equity theory and the more recent models of Colquitt and Greenberg (2001)—suggest that individuals' perceptions of justice shape their behavioral responses toward institutions (Adams, 1965; Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1990; Moorman, 1991; Tyler, 1989). Social justice comprises three dimensions: distributive justice (equity in the allocation of resources and benefits) (Deutsch, 1985; Adams, 1965); procedural justice (fairness in decision-making processes) (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Colquitt et al., 2001; Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler & Lind, 1992); and interactional justice (respectful and honest behavior in interactions) (Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies, 1987; Tyler & Bies, 1990; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Greenberg, 1993). A positive perception of justice in urban institutions enhances citizens' trust in city councils and, consequently, fosters greater participation.

Overall, the review of theoretical foundations and previous studies shows that citizen participation, institutional trust, and perceived social justice are three interrelated components that mutually reinforce one another in the context of urban governance. Citizen participation occurs when local institutions such as city councils demonstrate competence, transparency, integrity, and benevolence, thereby earning public trust. Conversely, citizens show active engagement in urban processes when they experience justice in resource distribution, decision-making procedures, and institutional interactions. Accordingly, the theoretical literature emphasizes that social justice, as a fundamental perception, serves as a

precursor to institutional trust, while trust acts as a mediating mechanism that strengthens citizen participation. Considering the existing research gap in Iran regarding the simultaneous examination of these three variables within the context of Islamic City Councils, this study aims to test these relationships empirically in the city of Babol.

Despite the theoretical importance of justice and trust in enhancing citizen participation, a significant gap persists in Iran's empirical literature regarding the simultaneous examination of them in the context of Islamic City Councils. Most domestic studies have investigated these concepts separately, and few have explored the causal relationships between social justice, institutional trust, and citizen participation at the local level. For this reason, this study—drawing on Adams' (1965) social justice theory and Portes' (1998) social capital theory—examines the effect of perceived social justice on citizen participation, with the mediating role of trust in Babol's Islamic City Councils.

The research problem stems from the reality that declining public trust and weak perceptions of social justice among citizens are among the key barriers to effective participation in Babol's urban management. Therefore, the central research question is:

Does perceived social justice influence citizen participation through the mediating role of trust in Islamic City Councils?

Based on this, the research hypotheses are formulated as follows:

1. Perceived justice has a significant effect on citizen participation.
2. Perceived justice has a significant effect on trust in Islamic City Councils.
3. Trust in Islamic City Councils has a significant effect on citizen participation.
4. Perceived justice has a significant effect on citizen participation through the mediating role of trust in Islamic City Councils.

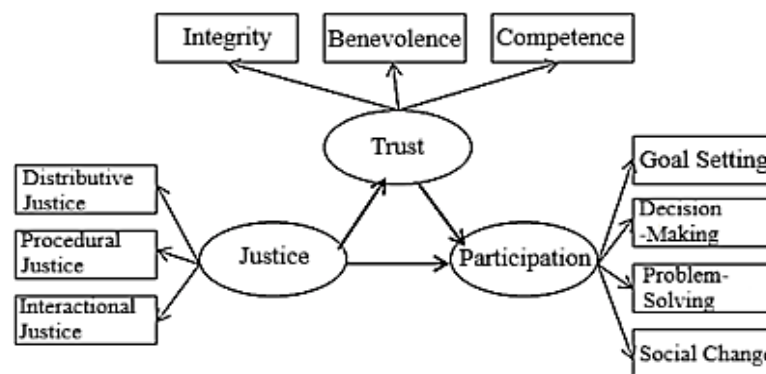


Figure 1. Conceptual Research Model

2. Literature review

A review of prior studies reveals that, within the fields of public administration, urban management, and the social sciences, extensive research has examined the connection between the variables of this study and other related constructs. However, studies that simultaneously investigate the relationships among the three variables—perceived justice, trust, and citizen participation—remain scarce. The researchers identified no research that analyzed the simultaneous relationship between these three variables within an integrated model.

For example, studies by Rezaei Alibabalu (2015), Hazrati Jahan et al. (2017), and Rezaei Alibabalu et al. (2017) examined the relationship between perceived justice and citizen participation, highlighting a positive and significant association between the two variables.

Furthermore, studies conducted by Hadadnia (2010), Danaeifard et al. (2016), Javaheri Kamal (2007), and Tabarsa (2010) explored the relationship between perceived justice and trust, yielding similar findings. In addition, the results of research by Azkia and Hasani Rad (2009), Ali Pour et al. (2009), Rajabi Farjad et al. (2014), Maleki and Omidovar (2015), Newton (2001), Rothstein and Uslaner (2005), Zmerli and Newton (2008), and Kelly (2009) supported the positive and significant relationship between trust and citizen participation.

Moreover, trust has been employed as a mediating variable in numerous studies, with its intermediary role in strengthening the effects of justice and participation repeatedly confirmed (Seyedjavadin et al., 2013; Hadavi Nejad & Abbasi, 2014; Abbas et al., 2016; Zahedi & Ghorbani, 2017; Danaei et al., 2015;

Azadian & Malek Mohammadi, 2017). These findings collectively indicate that a simultaneous examination of the relationships among perceived justice, trust, and citizen participation can fill an important research gap and contribute to advancing the theoretical literature in this domain.

3. Study area

The city of Babol, the capital of Babol County, is one of the most populous areas in Mazandaran Province. Geographically, it is located at 36°34' north latitude and 52°44' east longitude from the Greenwich meridian. The city is situated approximately 210 kilometers from Tehran. According to the 2016 National Population and Housing Census, the

population of Babol city was reported to be 250,217, while the total population of the county reached 531,930. The county covers an area of approximately 1,578 square kilometers and comprises seven districts: Babolkenar, Bandpey-e Sharqi, Bandpey-e Gharbi, Gatab, Lalehabad, the Central District, and Amirkola (Mazandaran Province Statistical Yearbook, 2015).

In terms of its borders, Babol County is bounded to the north by the counties of Babolsar and Fereydukenar, to the northeast by Simorgh, to the east by Qaemshahr and North Savadkuh, to the southeast by Savadkuh, to the west by Amol, and to the south by the Alborz mountain range and Firuzkuh County in Tehran Province (ibid.).

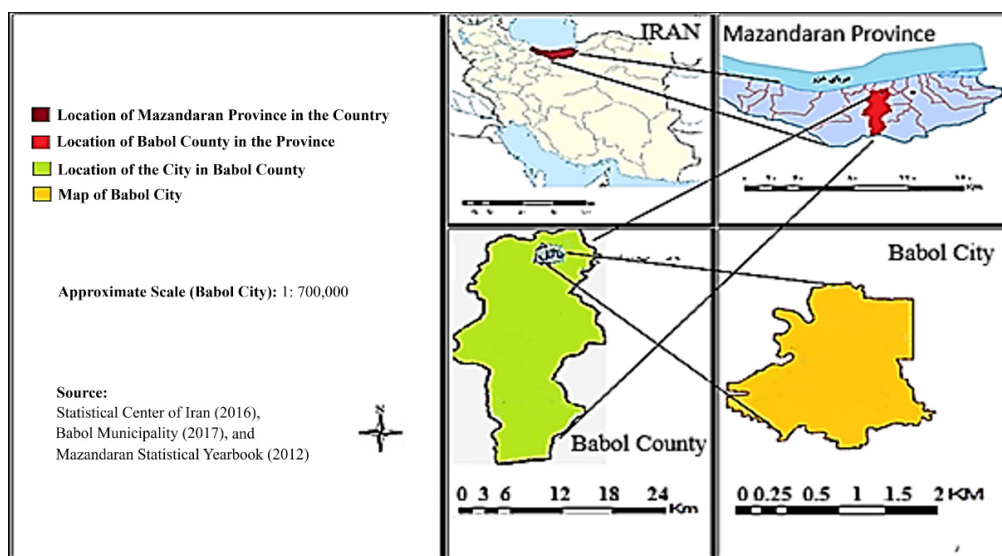


Figure 2. Geographical location of Babol city in Mazandaran province

In the urban and administrative dimension, the Islamic City Council of Babol, comprising nine elected members in its sixth term, plays a significant role in the local governance structure. According to official announcements, the names of the nine principal elected members of the sixth term have been publicly released. The council operates through several specialized committees, including Technical and Construction Affairs, Urban Services and Environment, Transportation and Traffic, Urban Aesthetics and Green Spaces, Planning and Budget, Property and Legal Affairs, and Urban and Building Planning. The council holds regular monthly meetings attended by the mayor and representatives of executive departments. Among its major operational functions

are the approval of the municipality's annual budget, oversight of construction and development projects, handling citizen complaints, supporting cultural and environmental initiatives, and coordinating with provincial institutions.

Furthermore, through its official information platform, the council publishes performance reports, resolutions, and urban development plans. Given the scope of its activities, the specialized composition of its members, and its direct linkage with urban management, the Islamic City Council of Babol serves as a central pillar of local decision-making. This makes it a dynamic setting for analyzing key components, including social trust, institutional transparency, and citizen participation.

4. Materials and methods

4.1. Statistical population and sampling method

In the present study, the statistical population comprised all citizens aged 18 and above in the city of Babol during the second half of 2017. According to the 2016 census, the population of Babol city was 250,217, of which approximately 70% (around 175,000 individuals) were 18 years or older.

The sampling procedure was designed as follows: first, the city was divided into two urban regions (Northern and Southern) (Babol Urban Division Reference). Then, several neighborhoods were selected as clusters from each region (Stage 1: multistage cluster sampling). In the second stage, participants were randomly chosen within each selected neighborhood using simple random sampling. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's table (1970), the sample size was determined to be 368 individuals. The multistage cluster sampling approach, accompanied by cluster selection across the Northern and Southern regions of the city, ensured adequate representation of the target population. Considering the potential for incomplete responses, 450 questionnaires were distributed among citizens, of which 394 complete and valid questionnaires were ultimately used for the final analysis.

4.2. Data collection instruments

Data were collected through both library-based research and a field survey questionnaire.

- In the library-based research phase, resources such as books, academic articles, statistical reports, and official documents were utilized to develop theoretical foundations of the study, review previous research, identify key variables, and design the conceptual model.

- In the field phase, data were collected using standardized questionnaires whose validity and reliability had been confirmed in prior reputable studies.

The questionnaires consisted of three main sections:

1. Perceived justice (based on questionnaire [56]) with three dimensions:

- Distributive justice (5 items)
- Procedural justice (6 items)
- Interactional justice (9 items)

2. Trust (based on questionnaire [57]) with three dimensions:

- Competence (6 items)
- Benevolence (5 items)
- Integrity (6 items)

3. Citizen participation (based on questionnaire [58]) with four dimensions:

- Goal-setting (4 items)
- Decision-making (4 items)
- Problem-solving (4 items)
- Social change and transformation (4 items)

All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

4.3. Reliability and validity of measurement instruments

To assess the reliability of the questionnaires, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed. A pilot test was conducted using 30 questionnaires, and the collected data were analyzed using SPSS software. The results (Table 1) revealed that the Cronbach's alpha values for all variables exceeded 0.7, highlighting that the instruments used were reliably suitable for the study.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire

Cronbach's alpha	Number of items	Construct
0.78	20	Justice
0.76	17	Trust
0.77	16	Participation
0.84	53	Total

The validity of the questionnaires was assessed using two approaches:

1. Content validity: The questionnaires were reviewed and approved by several university professors and experts in urban management. The items were

confirmed to be consistent with the conceptual dimensions of the constructs.

2. Construct validity: Construct validity was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using LISREL software. In this analysis, the relationships

between the latent variables—justice, trust, and participation—and their respective measurement indicators were examined.

The model fit indexes (Table 2) indicated that the measurement model exhibited good fit, with all

indexes falling within the acceptable range (i.e., $\chi^2/df < 3$, RMSEA < 0.1 , and GFI and AGFI > 0.9). These results demonstrate the appropriateness of the measurement scales and confirm the construct validity of the instruments.

Table 2. Goodness-of-fit indexes of the measurement model

Fit index	Value	Criterion/interpretation
χ^2/df (Chi-square/df)	2.5918	< 3 (acceptable fit)
p-value (Statistical significance)	0.000	< 0.05 (significant)
RMSEA (Root mean square error of approximation)	0.086	< 0.10 (acceptable fit)
GFI (Goodness-of-fit index)	0.92	> 0.90 (good fit)
AGFI (Adjusted goodness-of-fit index)	0.91	> 0.90 (good fit)

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive analysis and one-sample t-test

To examine the current status of the research variables in the statistical population, a one-sample t-test was employed. In this test, the mean responses were compared with the benchmark value of 3 at a 95% confidence level. A mean value greater than 3 indicates a more favorable status for the variable under

investigation. This analysis was conducted using SPSS software, and the results are presented in Table 3.

The findings revealed that the levels of perceived justice, trust in Islamic City Councils, and citizen participation in Babol were all above the average threshold, indicating a relatively favorable condition for these variables.

Table 3. One-sample t-test results for research variables

Construct/dimension	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value	Mean difference	95% Confidence interval	Status
Distributive justice	3.981	0.480	30.075	393	0.000	0.981	0.917 – 1.045	Favorable
Procedural justice	4.215	0.457	39.109	393	0.000	1.215	1.153 – 1.276	Favorable
Interactional justice	4.141	0.380	44.187	393	0.000	1.141	1.090 – 1.192	Favorable
Justice (overall)	4.112	0.332	49.272	393	0.000	1.112	1.068 – 1.157	Favorable
Competence	3.967	0.470	30.283	393	0.000	0.967	0.904 – 1.029	Favorable
Benevolence	3.943	0.690	20.113	393	0.000	0.943	0.851 – 1.036	Favorable
Integrity	3.882	0.564	23.014	393	0.000	0.882	0.806 – 0.958	Favorable
Trust (overall)	3.931	0.470	29.166	393	0.000	0.931	0.868 – 0.944	Favorable
Goal-setting	3.427	0.612	10.028	393	0.000	0.427	0.345 – 0.509	Moderate
Decision-making	3.550	0.640	12.066	393	0.000	0.550	0.465 – 0.636	Favorable
Problem-solving	3.292	0.547	7.871	393	0.000	0.292	0.219 – 0.365	Moderate
Social change	3.570	0.641	13.088	393	0.000	0.570	0.484 – 0.656	Favorable
Citizen participation	3.460	0.368	18.408	393	0.000	0.460	0.411 – 0.509	Moderate

5.2. Testing the conceptual model and research hypotheses

To examine the causal relationships among the research variables, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed using LISREL software. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the structural model with standardized

coefficients and significance values, respectively. According to the results, if the t-value is greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96 , the relationship between the variables is considered statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

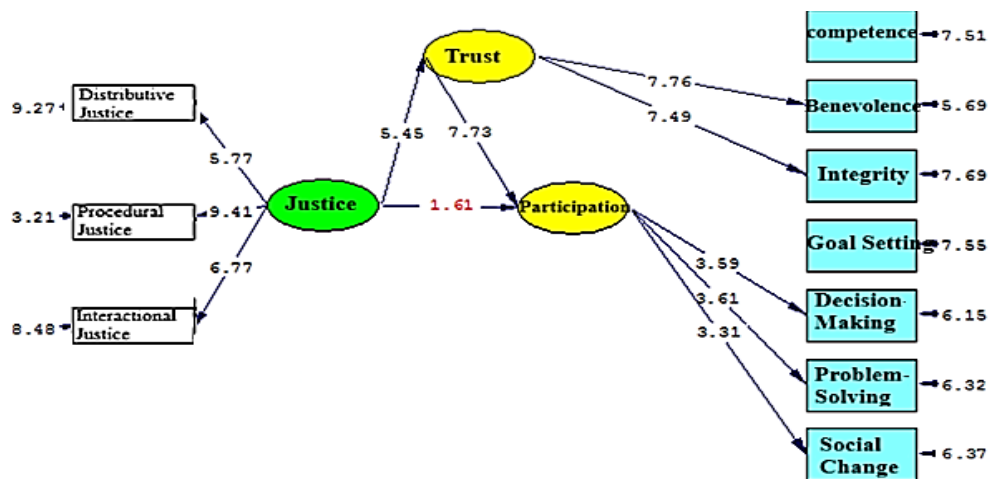


Figure 3. Structural model with significance values

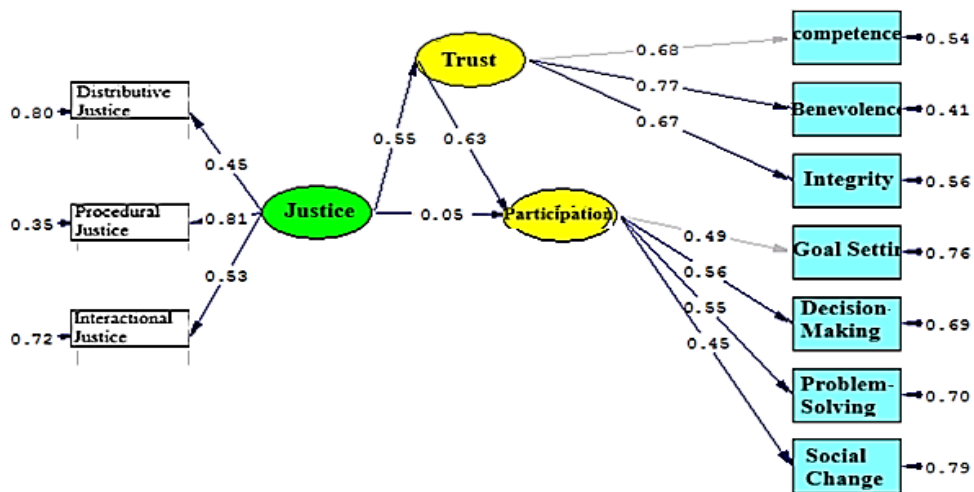


Figure 4. Causal relationships model

Table 4 summarizes the relationships among the variables based on the structural model and significance values. According to the results:

1. Perceived justice has a positive and significant effect on trust in Islamic City Councils.
2. Trust in city councils has a positive and significant effect on citizen participation.
3. Perceived justice also exerts a direct effect on citizen participation.

4. In the final model, the mediating role of trust in the relationship between justice and participation was confirmed.

In other words, trust in city councils serves as an important mediating variable that transmits the effect of perceived justice to citizen participation, thereby enhancing citizens' engagement with urban institutions.

Table 4. Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t-value	Hypothesis Result
Justice → Participation	0.05	1.61	Rejected
Justice → Trust	0.55	5.45	Supported
Trust → Participation	0.63	7.73	Supported
Justice → Trust → Participation (Mediation)	0.25	3.82	Supported

Note: A t-value greater than 1.96 indicates significance at the 95% confidence level.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to examine the impact of perceived justice on citizen participation, with the mediating role of trust in the City Council of Babol. The analysis of the findings indicated that citizens' overall perception of social justice is at a favorable level; however, distributive justice was evaluated lower than the other dimensions (procedural and interactional justice). This result aligns with Distributive Justice Theory (Rawls, 1971) and suggests that the fair allocation of resources and benefits fosters greater trust and participation among citizens.

Although perceived justice did not have a direct significant effect on citizen participation ($\beta = 0.05$; $t = 1.61$), this finding implies that justice alone cannot serve as a sufficient driver for active citizen participation and underscores the importance of mediating variables such as trust. This observation is consistent with Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1998), which posits that social trust is a key component connecting citizens' attitudes and behaviors, facilitating effective engagement with public institutions and participation in collective affairs. From the perspective of organizational justice, perceptions of justice in resource allocation, procedural transparency, and interactional behavior alone do not necessarily translate into real participation without the formation of trust.

The findings further showed that perceived justice has a positive and significant effect on citizens' trust ($\beta = 0.55$; $t = 5.45$), consistent with studies by Javaheri Kamal (2007), Tabarsa (2010), Hadadnia (2010), and Danaeifard et al. (2016). This positive effect indicates that the more citizens perceive processes and resource distribution as just, the greater their trust in the competence, integrity, and benevolence of the councils. In other words, perceived justice establishes trust as a necessary mediator for achieving active participation and fosters constructive interaction between citizens and management institutions.

Moreover, citizens' trust has a positive and significant effect on their participation in urban affairs ($\beta = 0.63$; $t = 7.73$), which aligns with findings from Azkia & Hasani Rad (2009) to Kelly (2009). This result indicates that institutional trust enhances citizens' capacity to engage actively in decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting, and social change. Without it, participation remains limited even when a certain level of justice exists. The analysis of indirect paths also confirmed that trust in the councils plays a

significant mediating role between perceived justice and participation. This highlights that justice and trust operate in a sequential manner: perceived justice forms the foundation for trust, which in turn directly motivates active citizen participation.

Analytically, these findings suggest that to achieve real and effective citizen participation, policymakers and council members should focus not only on implementing justice in resource allocation and processes but also on creating, strengthening, and maintaining citizens' trust in local institutions. Institutional trust encompasses the councils' competence, benevolence, and integrity; without its development, justice remains a mere perception and cannot significantly influence participatory behavior. Therefore, the pathway to social participation in urban management is a dual and integrated one, where perceived justice and institutional trust operate concurrently.

Regarding different dimensions of participation, decision-making and social change scored slightly higher than goal-setting and problem-solving, which aligns with citizen participation theories (Levine, 1948; Akbari & Amirmohammadi, 2011). This suggests that motivational factors and social trust play a crucial role in activating participation, and councils should enhance transparency, accountability, and integrity to facilitate genuine citizen engagement.

Limitations of this study include its geographical focus on a single city (Babol), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cities. The use of self-reported questionnaires may introduce respondent bias, reflecting citizens' perceptions rather than actual behavior. Additionally, the temporal scope of the study, conducted in the second half of 2017, might have influenced the results.

Based on the analytical findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The City Council should strengthen its role as a coordinator between citizens and management institutions and prioritize citizen-centered and participatory governance approaches.
- Council members can enhance participation by engaging in face-to-face interactions, continuously addressing citizens' concerns, and providing transparent responses.
- Active presence of council members in local communities and cultural-religious events can foster a sense of equality, brotherhood, and emotional connection between citizens and the council.

- Councils should avoid personal interests in decision-making and enhance trust and perceived justice by providing clear rationales for their actions.
- Urban management can strengthen social capital and public trust by reducing inequalities, implementing justice in resource allocation and development projects, and increasing transparency.
- Overall, the study indicates that perceived justice significantly influences citizen participation through the mediation of trust, and enhancing institutional trust is a prerequisite for fully realizing the benefits of social justice and promoting active citizen participation.

Authors' Contributions

The contributions of the authors were as follows: the first author contributed 34%, the second author 33%, and the third author 33%.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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