Evaluating organizational legitimacy in social media: Emotion in discursive legitimacy judgments

Full paper

Sub-theme 13 'Close to Heart: The Emotional Underpinnings of Institutions and Organizations', Egos 2019, Edinburgh

Ella Lillqvist
University of Helsinki, Centre for Consumer Society Research
ella.lillqvist@helsinki.fi

Kathryn Fahy
Sheffield University Management School, Marketing, International Enterprise and Strategy Division
kathryn.fahy@sheffield.ac.uk

Johanna Moisander
Aalto University School of Business, Department of Management Studies
johanna.moisander@aalto.fi

Abstract

In this paper, we analyse the role of emotion discourse in the construction of organizational legitimacy in social media. We build an evaluative-discursive theoretical perspective on emotion that allows us to explore emotions as a type of legitimacy judgment and elaborate on how they are mobilized for the discursive validation of legitimacy judgments in an online community. Empirically, we analyze how users of the social news and community website Reddit express and validate legitimacy judgments of IT organizations through emotion discourse. We seek to contribute to developing understanding of processes of discursive (de)legitimation, to the role of emotion in legitimacy judgments, and to social media as discursive contexts of legitimacy formation.

Introduction

In this paper, we analyse the role of emotion discourse in the construction of organizational legitimacy in social media. We extend research that focuses on the role of cognition and communication among evaluators in the formation of legitimacy judgments (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011) by elaborating the role of emotion discourse in the construction and validation of legitimacy judgments. While scholars have, for some time, recognized the role of emotional appeals in rhetorical legitimation strategies (Green Jr, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), attention to the role of emotions in legitimacy judgments is only recently gaining ground. Huy, Corley and Kraatz (2014), for example, examine the interaction of emotional reactions and legitimacy judgments in planned organizational change and the ways in which emotional reactions can trigger abrupt changes in middle-manager perceptions of organizational change agent legitimacy. Toubiana and Zietsma (2017), in calling attention to the 'emotional registers' of institutional logics, point to the ways in which emotive responses and emotion-laden influence activities in social media can undermine organizational legitimacy.

1

In existing literature, there is a tendency to conceptualize emotions as reactions or responses (Voronov, 2014) to perceived violation of expectations rather than an integral component of assessments of legitimacy and an "intrinsic part of cognitions, beliefs, and moral judgments" (Voronov & Vince, 2012p. 75). Thus, there is a need to bring new theoretical resources to bear in developing our conceptualization of emotion and our understanding of the role of emotion in legitimacy judgments. In this paper, we build an evaluative-discursive theoretical perspective on emotion that allows us to explore emotions as a type of legitimacy judgment and elaborate on how they are mobilized for the discursive validation of legitimacy judgments in an online community.

In building this perspective, we draw on insights from Martha Nussbaum's (2001) emotion theory, discursive psychology (Edwards, 1999) as well as literature on organizational legitimacy. The 'evaluative' side of this perspective refers to the view that far from being antithetical to 'rational' judgment, emotions actually *are* a form of evaluative judgment and information processing (Nussbaum, 2001), and thus underpin perceptions of legitimacy (Moisander, Hirsto, & Fahy, 2016). This means that emotions are not just vague feelings arising from thin air; instead, they are always intentionally (as opposed to accidentally) directed at a specific object and they integrate perceptions, beliefs, and value judgments about the object, particularly the perception of a high personal significance (Nussbaum, 2001). The evaluative content of emotions is also shaped by social norms and circumstances (Nussbaum, 2001). In fact, we understand emotions both as evaluative judgments and as culturally formed discursive processes that are relational and organized as part of socially recognized practices (Edwards, 1999; Wetherell, 2012). Combining an evaluative theory of emotion and a discursive perspective, our key contention is that various emotions inherently contain assumptions that become part and parcel of the semantic content that referring to or expressing these emotions conveys.

Social media is a particularly interesting and relevant context for our study for a number of reasons. Scholars have recently pointed to the importance of social media as a site for legitimacy struggles (Barros, 2014; Castelló, Etter, & Årup Nielsen, 2016; Etter, Colleoni, Illia, Meggiorin, & D'Eugenio, 2018b; Glozer, Caruana, & Hibbert, 2019) and to the highly emotional(ized) nature of communication and interaction in social media (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). The emotionalized nature of interaction in social media has implications for legitimation dynamics. For example, Toubiana and Zietsma (2017), show how social media

platforms can have an emotional eco-chamber effect, whereby the amplification of emotions can lead to collective mobilization in supporting or challenging organizational action.

Thus, from a legitimacy perspective, social media is as an increasingly influential arena for the expression of individual legitimacy judgments and for the formation and communication of collective validity judgments in particular (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Scholars examining the role of social influence in legitimacy judgment formation (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015) distinguish between individual 'propriety' judgments and collective 'validity' judgments and point to the role of collective actors, such as media and government agencies in selecting and communicating 'validity cues' that can influence individual legitimacy judgments (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Therefore, developing understanding of the role of emotion in legitimacy judgments needs to attend to individual expressions of emotion *and* to how emotion is implicated in the practices that construct collective validity judgments in social media.

The research problem that we address is the following: *How is emotion expressed and mobilized in the social construction of legitimacy judgments in social media?* Empirically, our case study focuses on the online community and content sharing site, Reddit, and specifically on user evaluations of discussions initiated by IT organizations that make web browsers.

Our study offers three contributions to the literature on organizational legitimacy. First, we build an evaluative-discursive theoretical perspective on emotion that highlights the nature of emotions as evaluative judgments that draw on sound reasonings and culturally coherent value frameworks. Second, we extend understanding of social media as discursive contexts of legitimacy formation. Third, we contribute to understanding the role of emotion discourse in the practices and processes through which collective legitimacy judgments are validated in online environments. Overall, our study thus contributes to a better understanding of the role of emotion in the processes of social construction that shape organizational legitimacy in social media.

Theoretical framework

In order to extend thinking on the role of emotions in the social construction of organizational legitimacy, particularly in the context of social media, we first review relevant previous literature on legitimacy. Then we set out to build an evaluative-discursive perspective on emotion, according to which emotions are fundamentally value judgments influenced by,

3

expressed in, and spread through discourse. Finally, we reflect on social media as a unique context for legitimation and emotion discourse.

Legitimacy, discourse and emotion

Although organizations pursue legitimacy through a variety of practices, fundamentally legitimacy is social judgment made by constituents (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Ruef & Scott, 1998; Tost, 2011). Therefore, legitimacy is usually defined as a 'generalized perception' of congruence with 'some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). As a social judgment, then, legitimacy is achieved by conforming to the relevant 'cultural-cognitive frameworks' of the environment (Scott, 2014, p. 72), including the social norms that guide and constrain behavior in the institutional environment.

One aspect of legitimacy that has been studied widely is legitimacy 'criteria' or 'content' – the 'substantive perceptions and beliefs that underlie the judgment of an entity as legitimate or illegitimate' (Tost, 2011, p. 687), often classified as instrumental (or pragmatic), relational and moral judgments (Tost, 2011). Unlike 'cognitive legitimacy' which is described as 'taken-for-granted' (Suchman, 1995), pragmatic and moral legitimacy have been said to rest on *discursive evaluation* (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Suchman, 1995). This could also be said about relational legitimacy.

Discursive evaluation can be understood as a social process in which speakers explicitly or implicitly 'convey various kinds of subjective opinion in discourse and in so doing attempt to achieve some intersubjective consensus of values' (Hart, 2014, p. 43). This definition underscores that as social beings, humans are often very concerned with what others think and consider how voicing specific positions may be received within a group. This is relevant because legitimacy is a 'generalized' perception, not merely an opinion of any individual evaluator. Therefore we should ask how legitimation moves from the individual level (referred to as *propriety*) to a collective one which has been called *validity* (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006; Tost, 2011). The discursive perspective can help shed light on this process. It has been argued that individual evaluators' propriety judgments are influenced by rhetorical strategies (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). However, it is important to recognize that legitimacy evaluators are not merely recipients of legitimating strategies, but they voice their own judgments and justifications, and also form them in

4

dialogue with others. On a more general level, then, people actively (de)legitimate organizations in text and talk, and influence each other though discussion, producing common understandings and enabling the aggregation of individuals' judgments to legitimacy evaluations collectively shared by a majority of actors (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006; Tost, 2011).

Evaluative-discursive theory of emotion

In building our theoretical framework, we draw on Nussbaum's (2001, 2004) evaluative theory of emotion. According to this theory, emotions are not some kind of thoughtless forces of nature; instead, emotions *are* evaluative judgments that always involve thought about a specific object and an appraisal of that object, made from the agent's *personal* point of view and ascribing salience or *importance* to the object. The object of the emotion, in other words, is important for a role it plays in the life of the person whose emotion it is. Whether we fear or love something, we associate that person or thing with a personal significance (Nussbaum, 2001). What distinguishes different emotions is the way the object is seen: in the case of fear, we evaluate it as a threat, and in the case of love, as extremely valuable to us personally. These judgments may be true or false; for example, we may be mistakenly frightened by a shadow, and calm down when we realize the danger was not real.

Feelings and diverse bodily states such as increased heart rate also typically appear in connection with emotional experience, but Nussbaum argues that these elements should not be included in the very definition of emotion, because they are manifested too inconsistently, and sometimes not at all. Whereas emotions such as grief and anger involve very *similar thoughts* from one person to the next, these emotions *feel different* to from person to person (Nussbaum, 2001). As an example of thoughts that regularly appear in connection of specific emotions, Nussbaum explains that anger involves the following kinds of beliefs and judgments: 'that there has been some damage to me or to something or someone close to me; that the damage is not trivial but significant; that it was done by someone; that it was done willingly; that it would be right for the perpetrator of the damage to be punished' (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 188). Each emotion involves these kinds of beliefs and judgments, even though the exact constellation of course varies from one emotion to the next. We argue that these propositions are not only part of the assumed cognitive make-up of emotion, but that these ideas are sufficiently shared within a specific cultural and linguistic context to also contribute to the *semantic content* communicated when emotions are expressed or referred to in

5

discourse. When someone expresses anger, then, the utterance inherently contains a moral judgment against the perpetrator of the damage, and others will understand the implication.

An evaluative theory of emotion does not automatically imply a social constructionist or discursive perspective, but if, as argued by Nussbaum, beliefs of importance and value play a key role in emotions, it makes sense that emotions can also be 'powerfully shaped by social norms' (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 142). People learn from an early age what is deemed valuable in their socio-cultural context, and also how and which emotions should be expressed in various situations. Furthermore, constructionists argue that emotions (e.g. guilt, compassion, resentment, or fear) have social functions, contributing to the preservation of the moral rules of society (Armon-Jones, 1986). Emotion, when involved in communicating a moral rule, also demonstrates the 'sincerity of the agent's moral judgment' and the 'significance or importance of the rule' (Armon-Jones, 1986, p. 81). Therefore emotions, or more accurately the use of emotion vocabulary and other relevant semiotic resources, depend on and cannot be reasonably studied without careful attention to the *local moral order* in a specific cultural milieu, 'the system of rights, obligations, duties and conventions of evaluation' of that context (Harré, 1986, p. 8).

Form the discursive perspective, the use of emotion vocabulary can be understood as discursive practices (Wetherell, McCreanor, McConville, Moewaka Barnes, & le Grice, 2015, p. 57) that not only reflect and construct the evaluations and emotions themselves and communicates the assumptions contained in the emotion vocabulary, but also consolidate groups or communities of people around shared norms and values (Martin & White, 2005). As Ahmed (2004) has argued, 'emotions do things, and work to align individuals with collectives'. Furthermore, emotion discourse is not only limited to emotion vocabulary and other ways in which emotions are expressed; by this term we refer to all kinds of discourse related to emotions – how speakers bring up, interpret, and use emotions in discourse, 'avowing' their own or 'ascribing' them to other people (Edwards, 1999). People often discuss their own or other people's emotion discourse on a meta level, 'constructing the sense of events, orienting to normative and moral orders, to responsibility and blame, intentionality, and social evaluation' (Edwards, 1997, p. 187).

According to our evaluative-discursive theory of emotion, then, legitimacy judgments that involve emotion, and those that do not, are both based on information processing – just different modes thereof – and they both rely on specific legitimacy content. The key difference is that emotion-judgments are invested with, and communicate the ideas of,

6

personal value and importance, as well as possibly a sense of not being fully in control (Nussbaum, 2001). These inherent assumptions provide emotion discourse with stylistic and semantic content, allowing evaluators to communicate their sincerity, their commitment to or personal involvement with a judgment, the importance of the issue at hand, and crucially, to refer to the local moral order as the bedrock on which their emotions are founded.

Social media as a unique context of legitimation

Social media are technological contexts that offer specific 'affordances' or (perceived) potentials for human action (Gibson, 1986; Hutchby, 2001; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) that have important consequences for legitimation. According to (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) these affordances include visibility, persistence, editability, and association between people and between information and people. In short, we could argue that the *participative* (association) and *open* (visibility, editability, persistence) nature of these platforms are key affordances. These aspects can enable *new kinds of actors* such as bloggers (Vaast, Davidson, & Mattson, 2013) and *new kinds of influence activities* (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017) to disrupt institutional spheres and even cause legitimacy crises (Barros, 2014; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). Furthermore, it could be argued that social media, or at least some groups and collectives forming and residing in social media environments, can wield similar influence to 'validation institutions' (Bitektine & Haack, 2015) such as traditional media, government, and the judicial system.

Many authors have further pointed out that social media are 'polyphonic' in nature, meaning that many different 'voices' are present simultaneously and the process remains ongoing; a final consensus is never reached (Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013; Etter, Colleoni, Illia, Meggiorin, & D'Eugenio, 2018a; Glozer, Caruana, & Hibbert, 2018; Schultz, Castelló, & Morsing, 2013). This also means that organizations are unable to control their legitimacy or reputation in the same way they might have previously been able to – even though they still attempt to do so (Glozer et al., 2018; Lillqvist, Louhiala-Salminen, & Kankaanranta, 2016). One of the few papers to specifically address micro-level processes of discursive legitimation in a social media context is that of Glozer et al. (2018) who found the tendency of organizations to seek to harmonise dissent from social media users by 'discursive finalisation', or shutting down the conversation. It is noteworthy that Glozer et al. (2018) analyse organisation-led social media sites, namely sites where the organization has more

7

power than other users to control and moderate the discussion. This is very different from our context in this paper. Glozer et al. (2018) also do not specifically address emotion discourse.

Other research has found that emotions are often highly relevant in online contexts. Social media have been said to be home to 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2014), and contexts where 'emotional responses play an important role in the production and diffusion of evaluations' (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019). Toubiana and Zietsma (2017) argue that 'emotion-laden influence activities', including such practices as 'shaming', 'shunning' and 'supporting', take place particularly when expectations are violated (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017).

It is of particular note that social media users are not simply a set of individuals expressing opinions, but the media have been said to have 'networked' (e.g. Castelló, Etter, & Nielsen, 2016) or 'connective' affordances (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe, & Negoita, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). In some cases, actual 'online communities' are formed (e.g. Fernback, 2007; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003); however, it can be difficult to draw a line between these phenomena. Online communities can often be understood as 'imagined', in the sense that members do not, and realistically could not, know or communicate with most other members – and 'yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). Arguably, emotion and emotion discourse are important factors drawing these kinds of communities together. Far from being simply an expression of individuals' feelings, emotion consolidates groups or communities of people around *shared* feelings and values (Martin & White, 2005) by constructing 'relations of proximity, distance, affiliation and detachment, and inclusion and exclusion' (Wetherell et al., 2015, p. 58). Collectives are thus '"felt" as well as imagined and mediated'; emotions contribute significantly to creating the border between the inside and outside of a collective (Ahmed, 2004).

Methods and materials

The empirical study reported in this article focuses on the social news and community website Reddit and analyses how users react to promotional communication by IT companies that make web browsers. Reddit.com is a social news and community website where users can link to and discuss content from other sites and create their own communities of interest ('subreddits') (Lillqvist, Moisander, & Fırat, 2018; Massanari, 2017; Schneider, Souza, &

8

Lucas, 2014). The independently moderated subreddits focus on varied topics, but they often share a 'geek sensibility' as it is common for them to focus on topics such as technology, science, popular culture, and gaming (Massanari, 2017). A crucial feature of Reddit is that the users get to 'up-vote' or 'down-vote' posts, thus jointly influencing which posts can be seen on the site's front page.

The collected data consists of conversations on Reddit which can be described as 'naturally occurring' texts or talk (Potter, 2004; Silverman, 2006) – these conversations were produced with no involvement from the researchers. Such online discussions are also automatically recorded in a written, digital format that facilitates observing and analyzing spontaneous discussions that would be difficult to record in ephemeral face-to-face interactions.

Our data represents a type of Reddit post called AMA ('Ask Me Anything'), where organizations and individuals can start a conversation where others ask questions and comment. Our data is collected from the r/IAmA subreddit, which is one of Reddit's default subreddits, meaning that new users are automatically subscribed to it, and also one of the most popular subreddits. Thus its discussions can potentially influence legitimacy also beyond the Reddit context. We collected four separate AMA sessions conducted by IT companies (Microsoft, Opera, and Mozilla) that make web browsers (respectively: Internet Explorer, Opera, and Firefox). These AMAs were also connected because in the later AMAs the participants refer to the earlier ones. This allowed us to collect a large set of online discussions concerning similar products and organizations. The data consists of a total of nearly 340,000 words or 1,500 pages (see Table 1).

Case	Pages (in pdf)	Comments	Words
IE (day one)	89	454	29 279
IE (day two)	251	2 787	47 166
Opera	836	3 520	187 462
Firefox	347	3 113	75 056
Total	1 523	9 874	338 963

Table 1. Data

9

In analysing the data, we take a discourse analytic approach. Although there are many ways of doing discourse analysis, generally it has an 'analytic commitment to studying discourse as texts and talk in social practices' (Potter, 2004, p. 203) and examines not only *what* is said but also *how* it is said and how it relates to the social context. We draw on discursive psychology, which has an interest in the details of language use (Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Edwards (1999, p. 288) emphasizes that emotion discourse can be used to 'perform flexible, accountability-oriented, indexically sensitive, rhetorical work' and to analyze this, it is useful to zoom in on 'rhetorical contrasts' that point things that emotion discourse can do in text and talk (Edwards, 1997, 1999). People use emotion discourse for example to assign or avoid accountability – anger can be portrayed as irrational or as a natural, acceptable response to provocation (Edwards, 1999).

We were influenced by the methodological work of Gioia and colleagues (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Thus, the analysis was carried out in three main stages, with some iteration. In the initial stage, we identified instances of emotion discourse in the context of (de)legitimation of the three organizations, their products and representatives (these could be called 'first order codes', Gioia et al., 2013; Van Maanen, 1979). Atlas.ti 8 was used to assist with the coding process.

In the second stage, we started assembling the first order codes into 'second order themes' (Gioia et al., 2013). In the third stage, we grouped these into 'aggregate dimensions' (Gioia et al., 2013) while examining co-occurrences of various themes and dimensions and looking for similarities and differences between the cases. A key step in the Gioia approach is building, based on these codes, themes, and dimensions, a visual summary of the analysis, a *data structure* (see Figure 1).
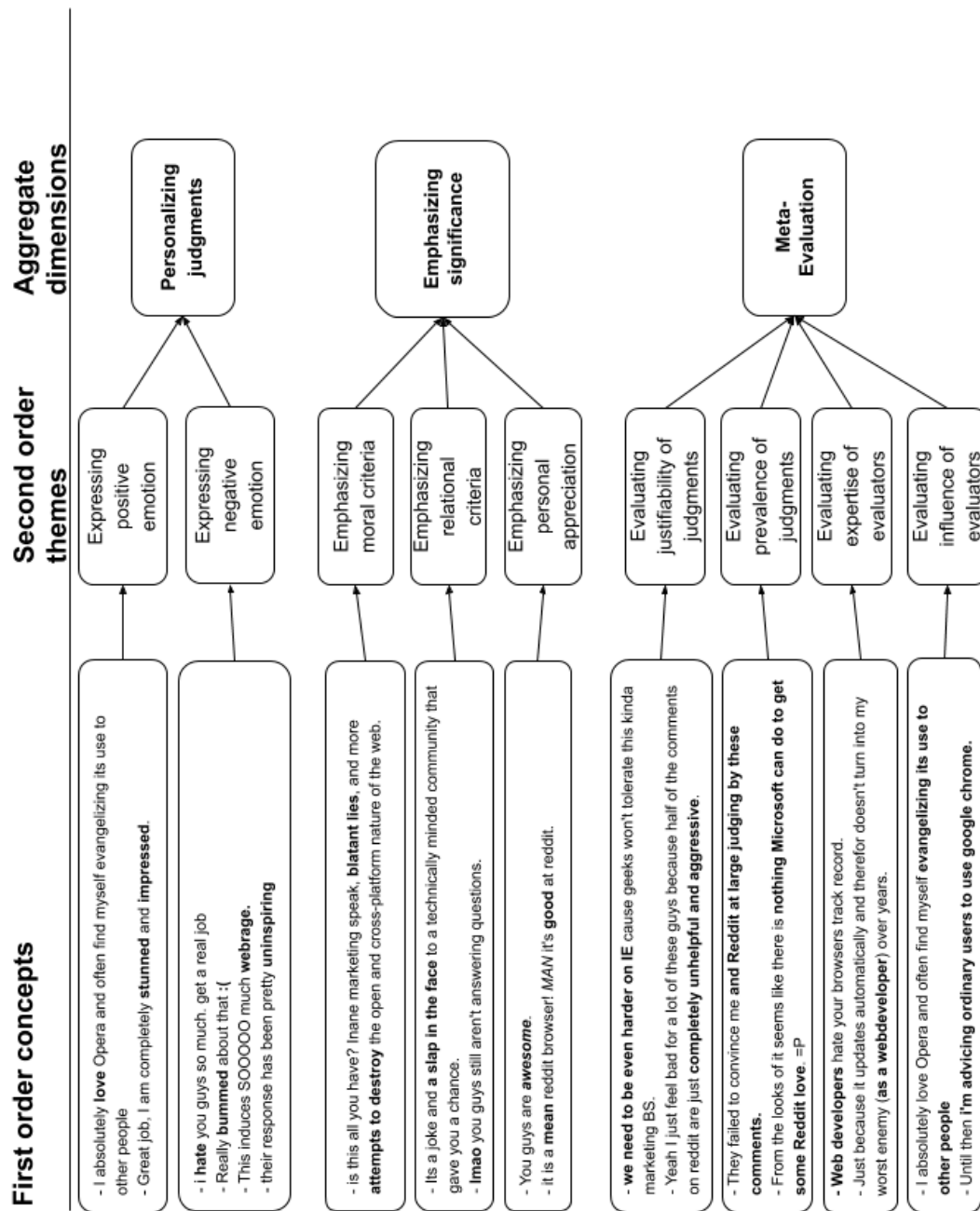
Figure 1. Data structure.

Articulating emotion as part of legitimacy judgments

In order to show how the IT organizations and their web browsers were evaluated by Reddit users by using emotion discourse, we identify and elaborate on three main discursive practices. Firstly, the personal character of legitimacy judgments was communicated by expressing them as emotions. Secondly, emotion were are mobilized to emphasize the significance of contextually relevant legitimacy criteria. The first two practices therefore related to communicating individual evaluators' judgments of social acceptability, that is, propriety (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Thirdly, we look at how impressions of validity – and arguably validity itself – were socially constructed using a discursive practice we call 'meta-evaluation', meaning meta-level discussion addressing the presumed justifiability and prevalence of certain emotion-judgments as well as the presumed expertise and influence of the evaluators and individuals or as a group. Thus the participants simultaneously construct the legitimacy judgments and themselves as a validating 'authority'.

Making it personal: expressing judgments as emotions

First, we look at expression of emotion as a type of discursive legitimacy judgment where people refer to emotions that organizations and products evoke in them. This way of expressing judgments are highly personal in nature, place the evaluator in the foreground, often as an 'injured party' or as the beneficiary of the organizations' behaviour.

The data contains numerous references to loving or hating one of the companies, their browsers, or specific features of either one. People also describe themselves, for example, as pleased, enthusiastic, angry, or annoyed. Despite the similarity of the three organizations and the products discussed, the discussions proceeded very differently in terms of the emotions that were expressed. Microsoft tried twice to promote Internet Explorer (IE), but was met with largely negative emotional responses. The Opera and Firefox teams who conducted their AMAs later were met with a very different emotional reaction. It was overwhelmingly the case that Opera/Mozilla and Firefox were described for example as *liked* or *loved*, whereas was *hate* and *anger* often came up in the context of IE/Microsoft. Hatred 'involves critical attitudes, such as appraisal of the object as in salient respects "unpleasant" or "bad"' (Armon-Jones, 1986), whereas anger implies some intentional damage done to the speaker, thus containing a moral condemnation of the perpetrator. In extract 1, the expression of anger

points to the habitual and presumably intentional nature of the failure of Microsoft, in this case, to take into consideration the feedback it has asked for.

> Extract 1
>
> You gather expectations on a product, which 99.9999% of times you cannot fulfil. It really pisses us off.

Sometimes the emotion discourse of this type appears by itself, with no further explanations – we can assume, then, that speakers think they are providing sufficient information in their utterance. For example, one Redditor commented to the IE team's AMA simply: *This is really sad*. The statement conveys a negative evaluation, although it leaves the reason for the sadness implicit. From the context it seems most likely that this Reddit user is simply referring to Microsoft's AMA as a whole – it certainly seemed to be a negative experience for many. The word *sad*, here, could refer to something like pity, perhaps with an ironic twist, but it differs from extract 1 in that it does not contain the idea of a personal affront; the evaluator is slightly more detached. Usually, however, expressions of emotion were used together with legitimacy criteria, i.e. stated reasons for such emotions, and leave less room for speculation.

Emphasizing significance: connecting emotions to legitimacy criteria

Emotion judgments also communicate the high importance of the issue for the speaker, as well as an inherent intensity and immediacy (and thus perhaps the idea of sincerity). Therefore emotion discourse can be used to emphasize the significance of issue and to draw attention to it. Connecting specific legitimacy criteria – in this case, particularly moral and relational criteria as well as a personal (lack of) appreciation – simultaneously intensifies the legitimacy judgment and constructs the emotions as warranted.

Within judgments of morality, honesty was especially salient. The evaluation of (dis)honesty was referred to using words such as *honest*, *doubletalk,* or *lies*, and, in particular, various forms of the word *bullshit*. In online discussions, this type of language use is of course common, but it does allow making explicit feelings of indignation and anger, which are connected to negative moral judgments. Emotion discourse, of course, does not have to involve specific emotion vocabulary.

In Extract 2, one Reddit user evaluates Microsoft's communication style. Here, additional discursive intensification takes the form of superlatives (*biggest*, *most*) and references to

extended periods of time (*ever, in quite a while*), therefore presenting Microsoft's AMA as an extreme case of bad behaviour.

Extract 2

The biggest load of fluff bull shit answers I've ever seen. The answer to the first guy's question was one of the most ridiculous things I have read in quite a while.

This very negative statement about Microsoft can be juxtaposed to a comment such as extract 3 from Opera's AMA. In extract 3, the user praises Opera and refers to Opera *earning respect* – this participant is orienting to the moral order; respect is given to those that behave in ways encouraged by social norms. This statement is immediately followed by another expression of personal appreciation (*awesome, great*) and an explanation as to why this is the case. The negative judgment of *competitors* is a clear reference to the earlier AMA by Microsoft.

Extract 3

I'm still not convinced about switching to Opera (yet), but you have definitely earned my respect as a company. You guys are awesome, and this is a great AMA. Thank you for not polluting reddit with a bunch of nonsense, like your competitors for instance.

Relational legitimacy criteria, in turn, mainly had to do with a local norm of active and respectful participation on Reddit. In the first of the AMAs, Microsoft overwhelmingly failed in this regard in the eyes of the Redditors—one of the main problems, in addition to perceived dishonesty, seemed to be a failure to meet normative expectations concerning participation. In extract 4 below, we see a user question the authenticity of the Microsoft's participation because the whole team responding to questions used the same account. Arguing that the organization's comments were strategically crafted, the commenter delegitimizes Microsoft's representatives as not real Redditors and simultaneously casts doubt on their honesty (*they claimed some gunff*). At the end of the comment, *whatever*, often used in slang as a passive-aggressive interjection, expresses negative emotion (perhaps annoyance or frustration). This can be contrasted with the second comment where another user judges positively the fact that Opera was represented by employees who were already long time members of Reddit and used their personal accounts for the AMA.

Extract 4

- I asked MS why they had to have a single reddit account; they claimed some gunff[1] about not being able to do an AMA with more than one account, but it was totally so their replies could go through their 1 bazillion lawyers. Whatever.

- Yeah, they [Opera] have 3 year club, 4 year club and even 5 year club guys answering questions so this seems a bit more legit.

There are also references to legitimacy criteria such as quality, competence, or aesthetics, expressed as personal appreciation. IE was described not only as *bad*, but as *the plague* and *a crapshoot*, and Microsoft's AMA was described as a *fiasco* and as *atrocious*, *terrible*, even *terriiiiiiiible*. Here, emotion is infused in evaluative expressions; the last example also illustrates that the informal context of social media allows for creative freedom in the expression of emotional content. At the same time, the exaggerated nature of such expressions also works to highlight the evaluative point, again focusing on the importance attached to the issue.

Toward validation: meta-evaluation

In addition to expressing opinions and emotions about the organizations, the participants' discourse also constructed impressions of validity, namely a view of legitimacy judgments as widely shared. This was done through the discursive practice of *meta-evaluation* – evaluating evaluations – which allows spreading one's own interpretation of legitimacy by presenting certain emotion-judgments as widespread and warranted, and by (de)constructing the expertise and influence of evaluators.

We are particularly interested in how people evaluate other people's emotions as warranted or not. In Extract 5, a commenter confirms the existence of a widespread emotion toward Microsoft's AMA about IE, namely *outrage*, another emotion word communicating the assumption of normative disapproval.

---

[1] 'stupid, annoying or pointless thing' (Urban Dictionary)

Extract 5

Let's contain our outrage a bit. These guys might not be answering all of our questions the way we'd like, but they're essentially our invited guests here and should be treated politely.

Simultaneously, however, the writer also argues that while it may be justified to feel outraged, it is bad manners to express it to such a degree. This implies the collective reaction was incommensurate with the original offense. Through the repeated use of *our* and *we*, the writer, while being critical, still includes himself as part of the outraged 'we', thus in fact accepting Microsoft's insufficient answers as a justifiable reason to be upset.

Another way of construing an impression of validity is drawing attention to the influence or expertise of the evaluator(s), yourself or others. In our data, this was done particularly by reference to technical knowledge; Reddit users were described as *technical*, *tech savvy*, and as *web developers*:

Extract 6

I'm a web developer. Just wanted to say thanks for never being the browser I'm cursing at under my breath.

Here, a negative emotion (anger, frustration?) expressed as *cursing*, is connected to the professional activity of a *web developer*, suggesting that far from being irrational or unfounded, the emotion in question is the highly justified reaction of an expert. Such references to expertise also helped to construct the Reddit community as a whole as a credible validation 'institution' of sorts.

In sum, a key role of emotion in discursive legitimation is constructing an idea of a community of shared values and legitimacy judgments. Each time 'we', the community, is referred to, this enforces the notion of a collective evaluator that gains influence and credibility because of its size, expertise and consensus. In addition, this idea is supported by individuals arguing for their own credibility in ways that align with the constructed image of an expert community.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored and elaborated on the role of emotion discourse in the construction of organizational legitimacy in a social media context. We conducted an

16

empirical study in which we analysed how users of Reddit mobilized emotion in discourse to evaluate the communication and products of three technology companies that were promoting their web browsers on the site.

By articulating this empirically grounded perspective on organizational legitimacy and emotion in a social media context, we contribute to the literature on legitimacy, first, by building a evaluative-discursive theoretical perspective on emotion and legitimacy judgments by drawing on Nussbaum (2001) as well as previous work on emotion discourse. We argue that judgment is inherent to emotion and emotion has a constitutive instead of merely a supporting role in the forming of organizational legitimacy. Furthermore, emotions based on a underlying framework of social norms, which are after all, at the very core of the definition of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Second, we extend understanding of social media as discursive contexts where organizational legitimacy is formed. Especially in contexts such as social media, emotions are highly relevant and influential. Third, we contribute to understanding the practices and processes through which collective legitimacy judgments are validated in online environments. We also highlight the discursively constituted and contextual nature of legitimacy and shed light on specific discursive practices enabled by emotion discourse: personalization, emphasizing significance and validation through meta-evaluation.

We have analysed a case of social media discussion where emotions ran high and played a key role in the very process of legitimation. The fact that expressions of emotion were so widespread in this case is probably a combined consequence of both the emotional potential of the specific case, as many participants took it very personally, and the nature of social media discussion in general. In many other contexts, in traditional media for example, it is likely that writers seek credibility by focusing on facts and logical arguments, or at least factual-sounding argumentation at the expense of expressions of emotion. Social media, however, credibility can in fact be connected to the immediacy and sincerity conveyed by emotion discourse.

Centrally to our case, social media is also home to groups or communities that have their specific moral norms and other social expectations and that can at times act similarly to traditional validation institutions. Members have collective cultural authority over legitimation, involving, for example, a focus on community belonging (Castelló, Etter, & Nielsen, 2016)—they form communities of shared value that members' evaluations of organizations' communication draw on and construct. In fact, we found that as Reddit users

(de)legitimate the companies and their products, they simultaneously construct their community, and particularly construct it as an expert evaluator.

References

Ahmed, S. (2004). Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others. *Theory, Culture & Society, 21*(2), 25-42. doi:10.1177/0263276404042133

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

Armon-Jones, C. (1986). The social functions of emotions. In R. Harré (Ed.), *The social construction of emotions* (pp. 2-14). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Ashforth, B. E., & Gibbs, B. W. (1990). The double-edge of organizational legitimation. *Organization Science, 1*(2), 177-194. doi:10.1287/orsc.1.2.177

Bansal, P., & Clelland, I. (2004). Talking Trash: Legitimacy, Impression Management, and Unsystematic Risk in the Context of the Natural Environment. *Academy of Management Journal, 47*(1), 93-103. doi:10.2307/20159562

Barros, M. (2014). Tools of Legitimacy: The Case of the Petrobras Corporate Blog. *Organization Studies, 35*(8), 1211-1230. doi:10.1177/0170840614530914

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(5), 739-768. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661

Bitektine, A. (2011). Toward a theory of social judgments of organizations: The case of legitimacy, reputation, and status. *Academy of Management Review, 36*(1), 151-179.

Bitektine, A., & Haack, P. (2015). The "macro" and the "micro" of legitimacy: Toward a multilevel theory of the legitimacy process. *Academy of Management Review, 40*(1), 49-75. doi:10.5465/amr.2013.0318

Castelló, I., Etter, M., & Nielsen, F. Å. (2016). Strategies of legitimacy through social media: The networked strategy. *Journal of Management Studies, 53*(3), 402–432. doi:10.1111/joms.12145

Castelló, I., Etter, M., & Årup Nielsen, F. (2016). Strategies of Legitimacy Through Social Media: The Networked Strategy. *Journal of Management Studies, 53*(3), 402-432. doi:doi:10.1111/joms.12145

Castelló, I., Morsing, M., & Schultz, F. (2013). Communicative dynamics and the polyphony of corporate social responsibility in the network society. *Journal of Business Ethics, 118*(4), 683-694.

Deephouse, D. L., & Suchman, M. C. (2008). Legitimacy in organizational institutionalism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 49–77). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

19

Edwards, D. (1997). *Discourse and Cognition*. London: SAGE Publications.

Edwards, D. (1999). Emotion Discourse. *Culture & Psychology, 5*(3), 271-291.
doi:10.1177/1354067x9953001

Etter, M., Colleoni, E., Illia, L., Meggiorin, K., & D'Eugenio, A. (2018a). Measuring Organizational
Legitimacy in Social Media. *Business & Society, 57*(1), 60-97. doi:10.1177/0007650316683926

Etter, M., Colleoni, E., Illia, L., Meggiorin, K., & D'Eugenio, A. (2018b). Measuring Organizational
Legitimacy in Social Media: Assessing Citizens' Judgments With Sentiment Analysis. *Business
& Society, 57*(1), 60-97. doi:10.1177/0007650316683926

Etter, M., Ravasi, D., & Colleoni, E. (2019). Social Media and the Formation of Organizational
Reputation. *Academy of Management Review, 44*(1), 28–52. doi:10.5465/amr.2014.0280

Fernback, J. (2007). Beyond the diluted community concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on
online social relations. *New Media & Society, 9*(1), 49-69. doi:10.1177/1461444807072417

Gibson, J. J. (1986). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence
Erlbaum Associates.

Gioia, D. A., & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation.
Strategic management journal, 12(6), 433-448.

Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research.
Organizational Research Methods, 16(1), 15-31. doi:10.1177/1094428112452151

Glozer, S., Caruana, R., & Hibbert, S. A. (2018). The Never-Ending Story: Discursive Legitimation in
Social Media Dialogue. *Organization Studies, 0*(0). doi:10.1177/0170840617751006

Glozer, S., Caruana, R., & Hibbert, S. A. (2019). The Never-Ending Story: Discursive Legitimation in
Social Media Dialogue. *Organization Studies, 40*(5), 625-650.
doi:10.1177/0170840617751006

Golant, B. D., & Sillince, J. A. A. (2007). The Constitution of Organizational Legitimacy: A Narrative
Perspective. *Organization Studies, 28*(8), 1149-1167. doi:10.1177/0170840607075671

Green Jr, S. E. (2004). A rhetorical theory of diffusion. *Academy of Management Review, 29*(4), 653-
669. doi:10.5465/AMR.2004.14497653

Harré, R. (1986). An outline of the social constructionist viewpoint. In R. Harré (Ed.), *The social
construction of emotions* (pp. 2-14). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Hart, C. (2014). *Discourse, grammar and ideology: Functional and cognitive perspectives*. London:
Bloomsbury Publishing.

Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, Texts and Affordances. *Sociology, 35*(2), 441-456.
doi:10.1177/s0038038501000219

Huy, Q. N., Corley, K. G., & Kraatz, M. S. (2014). From Support to Mutiny: Shifting Legitimacy Judgments and Emotional Reactions Impacting the Implementation of Radical Change. *Academy of Management Journal, 57*(6), 1650-1680. doi:10.5465/amj.2012.0074

Johnson, C., Dowd, T. J., & Ridgeway, C. L. (2006). Legitimacy as a social process. *Annual Review of Sociology, 32*(1), 53-78. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123101

Leonardi, P. M., & Vaast, E. (2017). Social Media and Their Affordances for Organizing: A Review and Agenda for Research. *Academy of Management Annals, 11*(1), 150-188. doi:10.5465/annals.2015.0144

Lillqvist, E., Louhiala-Salminen, L., & Kankaanranta, A. (2016). Power relations in social media discourse: Dialogization and monologization on corporate Facebook pages. *Discourse, Context & Media, 12*, 68-76. doi:10.1016/j.dcm.2015.11.001

Lillqvist, E., Moisander, J. K., & Fırat, A. F. (2018). Consumers as legitimating agents: How consumer-citizens challenge marketer legitimacy on social media. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 42*(2), 197-204. doi:10.1111/ijcs.12401

Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Massanari, A. (2017). #Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society, 19*(3), 329-346. doi:10.1177/1461444815608807

Moisander, J., Hirsto, H., & Fahy, K. M. (2016). Emotions in Institutional Work: A Discursive Perspective. *Organization Studies, 37*(7), 963-990. doi:10.1177/0170840615613377

Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2004). Emotions as judgments of value and importance. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions* (pp. 183-199). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: Sage.

Potter, J. (2004). Discourse analysis as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice* (2nd ed., pp. 200-222). London: SAGE.

Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London, England: Sage.

Preece, J., & Maloney-Krichmar, D. (2003). Online Communities: Focusing on Sociability and Usability. In J. Jacko & A. A. Sears (Eds.), *Handbook of Human-Computer Interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Ruef, M., & Scott, W. R. (1998). A Multidimensional Model of Organizational Legitimacy: Hospital Survival in Changing Institutional Environments. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 43*(4), 877-904. doi:10.2307/2393619

Schneider, D., Souza, J. d., & Lucas, E. M. (2014, 5-8 Oct. 2014). *Towards a typology of social news apps from a Crowd Computing perspective.* Paper presented at the Systems, Man and Cybernetics (SMC), 2014 IEEE International Conference on.

Schultz, F., Castelló, I., & Morsing, M. (2013). The Construction of Corporate Social Responsibility in Network Societies: A Communication View. *Journal of Business Ethics, 115*(4), 681-692. doi:10.1007/s10551-013-1826-8

Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*. London: SAGE Publications.

Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review, 20*, 571-610.

Suddaby, R., & Greenwood, R. (2005). Rhetorical Strategies of Legitimacy. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 50*(1), 35-67. doi:10.2189/asqu.2005.50.1.35

Tost, L. P. (2011). An integrative model of legitimacy judgments. *Academy of Management Review, 36*(4), 686-710. doi:10.5465/amr.2010.0227

Toubiana, M., & Zietsma, C. (2017). The Message is on the Wall? Emotions, Social Media and the Dynamics of Institutional Complexity. *Academy of Management Journal, 60*(3), 922-953. doi:10.5465/amj.2014.0208

Treem, J. W., & Leonardi, P. M. (2012). Social media use in organizations: Exploring the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence, and association. *Communication Yearbook, 36*(1), 143-189.

Vaast, E., Davidson, E. J., & Mattson, T. (2013). Talking about technology: the emergence of a new actor category through new media. *MIS Quarterly, 37*(4), 1069-1092.

Vaast, E., Safadi, H., Lapointe, L., & Negoita, B. (2017). Social Media Affordances for Connective Action: An Examination of Microblogging Use During the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill. *MIS Quarterly, 41*(4).

van Dijck, J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.

22

Van Maanen, J. (1979). The fact of fiction in organizational ethnography. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 24*(4), 539–550.

Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: SAGE Publications.

Wetherell, M., McCreanor, T., McConville, A., Moewaka Barnes, H., & le Grice, J. (2015). Settling space and covering the nation: Some conceptual considerations in analysing affect and discourse. *Emotion, Space and Society, 16*, 56-64. doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2015.07.005

Voronov, M. (2014). Towards a toolkit for emotionalizing institutional theory. *Emotions and the Organizational Fabric (Research on Emotion in Organizations, Vol. 10): Emerald Group, 10*, 167-196.

Voronov, M., & Vince, R. (2012). Integrating emotions into the analysis of institutional work. *Academy of Management Review, 37*(1), 58-81. doi:10.5465/armr.2010.0247