

## **Outside-In Constructions of Organizational Legitimacy: Sensitizing the Influence of Evaluative Judgments Through Mass Self-Communication in Online Communities**

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This article aims to further the current discussions in organizational studies about the construction of organizational legitimacy. We examine the influence of mass self-communication—in particular, evaluative judgments, such as product reviews, made by citizens in online communities—on the construction of organizational legitimacy. We chose an interdisciplinary approach in which we evaluated 177 studies from the field of organizational and communication science, relying on organizational legitimacy and mass self-communication as combined theoretical backbones. Our analysis revealed three sensitizing concepts: (1) community-mediated constituency, (2) audience engagement dilemmas, and (3) influencer-generated legitimacy. Based on these sensitizing concepts, we discuss outside-in (audience- or influencer-driven) and inside-out (company-driven) perspectives on the construction of organizational legitimacy.

*Keywords: organizational legitimacy, mass self-communication, online communities, evaluative judgments, social media*

In this article, we demonstrate how organizational legitimacy (OL) can be seen from an interdisciplinary perspective by inductively comparing organizational and communication studies. OL as “the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions” (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017, p. 9) involves both organizations and members of the society, such as citizens who are an organization’s perceivers of appropriateness. These perceivers

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Date submitted: 2016–07–14

<sup>1</sup> We like to thank the editors and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and discussions. We also thank Jim Slevin for his insightful suggestions on early drafts and Maggie Dundas for her supportive feedback during the final stage of developing the manuscript. This research was funded by the Dutch National Science Foundation (NWO) under Grant OND1359972.

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apply what they deem appropriate in their evaluation of an organization's products, services, and actions. This evaluation process attributes legitimacy to organizations.

By identifying connected themes in organizational and communication studies, we situate the construction of OL within the organizational and societal level of analysis (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). In line with recent OL research (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Deephouse et al., 2017), we also approach OL from an outside-in perspective, which assumes that citizens ascribe OL by sharing evaluative judgments (ideas, remarks, and opinions) about organizations and their products, services, and actions over the Internet. Accordingly, we combine OL theory (organizational level) with the field of mass self-communication (MSC; societal level). In this, we follow Castells' (2007) notion of MSC, which states that many social actors communicate and share content with many other social actors over the Internet. This is supported by recent OL research that identifies MSC as an important element in the construction of OL between organizations and citizens through social media platforms,<sup>2</sup> such as Twitter (Castelló, Etter, & Årup Nielsen, 2016). Finally, we respond to Deephouse et al.'s (2017) recent call for more interdisciplinary research to create more understanding about how social media (data) reflects and influences OL.

The aim of our study is to explain the role MSC plays in the construction of OL in social media, with a particular focus on online communities, such as special interest blogs or Facebook groups. In line with Kozinets (2002, 2010), we define online communities as computer-mediated social gathering spaces where people share and discuss written and audiovisual content based on special interest topics: for example, blogs or Facebook groups related to health, beauty, or politics. Such online communities share a sense of cohesiveness, commonality, and propinquity (Webb, Gibson, Wang, Chang, & Thompson-Hayes, 2015). They enable authors and participants to produce and share evaluative judgments about organizations as part of an interactive group activity.

We focus on online communities because authors and participants of special interest blogs and Facebook groups present and share evaluative judgments in a similar way. Like other social media, these online communities provide (1) the possibility to post and reply to messages and (2) moderation by administrators. However, they distinguish themselves from other social media because they enable authors and participants to (3) share and discuss in-depth information and (4) ask and answer in-depth questions about special-interest topics.

Recently, researchers have examined the role of individual evaluative judgments by citizens in tweets, with the goal of identifying the influence these judgments have on OL (Etter, Colleoni, Illia, Meggiorin, & D'Eugenio, 2016). They define evaluative judgments as affect-based responses, such as joy or disappointment, by individual citizens about organizations and their actions (Etter et al., 2016). However, Etter and colleagues (2016) do not consider the role of evaluative judgments produced and shared in online communities, nor do they examine how nonorganizational group-mediated processes

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<sup>2</sup> We adapt Meikle's (2016) definition of social media: "A specific set of internet-based, networked communication platforms. These use a business model of a database built by its own users. And they enable the convergence of public and personal communication. This definition includes Facebook and Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest and Instagram, Blogger, YouTube, among others" (p. x).

shape OL. For example, the use of a hashtag makes it possible for citizens to collect opinions or share concerns about a certain topic, but they may not share these hashtags based on an ongoing dialogue with other citizens (Meikle, 2016).

To explain the role of evaluative judgments during OL constructions in online communities, we introduce the more specific concept of online-mediated OL judgments. We define online-mediated OL judgments as any company-evaluating content—such as written messages, images, or audiovisual material—that a group of citizens produces, shares, and mediates via online communities outside the direct influence of a company. Essentially, online-mediated OL judgments made through online communities extend OL from a company or individually driven process into a multilevel system in which citizens construct OL collectively.

To conclude, we will address the changing developments in perceiving and ascribing OL by many that communicate with many in computer-mediated gathering spaces in which citizens share and discuss information that matters to them as part of an online group activity. This information can be of a personal nature but could also incorporate information that directly or indirectly ascribes or discredits OL. Hence, our research introduces an additional perspective on the construction of OL.

### **Changing Scenarios in OL Research and the Role of Online Stakeholder Dialogue**

Recent management and communication studies (Schultz, Castelló, & Morsing, 2013; Whelan, Moon, & Grant, 2013) have broadened the scope of the construction of OL by discussing the impact of social-media-based online stakeholder dialogue, which refers to a company's interaction and engagement with external stakeholders, such as consumers. In particular, Castelló et al. (2016) recently presented a networked perspective on legitimacy, based on a longitudinal case study that includes the analysis of conversations on Twitter between the staff of a multinational pharmaceutical company and external stakeholders. They found that these conversations follow no hierarchical order and are open to multiple stakeholders (Castelló et al., 2016).

This joint perspective sheds new light on the theoretical concept of OL. Over the years, OL research has gained more focus and moved from a general definition of what legitimacy is into various subtypologies, such as the well-explored media legitimacy. Bitektine (2011) defines this as legitimacy reflected through communication via print, audiovisual material, and radio broadcasts, and legitimacy influenced by formal regulators, such as governmental monitoring services.

Researchers (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Suchman, 1995) often discuss legitimacy based on (1) pragmatic, (2) cognitive, and (3) moral legitimacy processes. According to Palazzo and Scherer (2006), pragmatic legitimacy is based on the (financial) benefits stakeholders perceive from the activities a firm carries out. Cognitive legitimacy, on the other hand, works at a subconscious level. This means organizations cannot directly influence or manipulate stakeholders' perceptions of their legitimizing activities and processes (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Finally, moral legitimacy relates to stakeholders' responses to an organization's direct output, procedures, structures, and leaders. Companies can achieve moral legitimacy by participating in public discussions (Suchman, 1995) and using convincing arguments

in deliberative communication with the public (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). External stakeholders can actively voice their opinions in such public discussions and should therefore be considered part of the process and dialogue around the construction of OL (Elms & Phillips, 2009; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006).

This latter view is also reflected by organizational scholars (Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013) who identify stakeholder dialogue and a firm's engagement with stakeholders via social media as important communicative elements in strategic OL processes. In addition, several organizational studies have examined strategic communication practices by organizations on Twitter (Colleoni, 2013; Fischer & Reuber, 2014; Lee, Oh, & Kim, 2013) and engagement practices with external stakeholders through Twitter (Castelló et al., 2016). Other organizational researchers have addressed the role of stakeholder communication through company-owned blogs (Fieseler & Fleck, 2013) or the influence of consumer participation in organizational Facebook groups on ethical consumption (Gummerus, Liljander, & Sihlman, 2015). These recent OL studies share the notion that stakeholder dialogue manifests itself through organizational platforms, such as a company Twitter account, blog, or Facebook page. At the same time, nonorganizational members are able to coconstitute an organization through their written messages and the use of organizational hashtags on Twitter (Albu & Etter, 2016).

Although organizational researchers recognize the importance of MSC, they still address the construction of OL from an inside-out perspective. This perspective identifies organizations as leading actors in the process of constructing OL, whether through stakeholder dialogue (e.g., via a company-owned website, blog, Twitter, or Facebook account) or how it is constructed (e.g., through actions initiated and content shared and controlled by organizations). However, these studies fail to provide a perspective on the external independent construction of OL by citizens within online communities that integrate views from organizational and communication studies regarding the construction of OL. In addition, the body of organizational literature has hardly touched upon other social media, such as online communities where citizens may ascribe or discredit legitimacy through their online-mediated OL judgments as part of MSC. This article seeks to address this gap by describing (strategic) legitimation processes initiated by citizens who independently address and legitimize organizational products, services, and actions through online-mediated OL judgments within online communities.

### **OL Judgments in the Networked Society and the Role of Online-Mediated OL Judgments Produced in Online Communities**

The networked society enables citizens to act as coconstructors of OL by communicating through social media (Castelló et al., 2016). According to Castells (2007), "any post in the Internet, regardless of the intention of its author, becomes a bottle drifting in the ocean of global communication, a message susceptible of being received and reprocessed in unexpected ways" (p. 247). Moreover, citizens' evaluative judgments appear to function as societal instruments for constructing OL (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011). For example, Bitektine and Haack (2015) consider OL "not as an asset owned by an organization but as a judgment, with respect to that organization, rendered by individuals at the micro level and by collective actors at the macro level" (p. 50). Consequently, an OL judgment results from social actors engaged in communication, individually or as a group, which can influence an organization in a positive or negative manner (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). This multilevel

approach to OL and the influencing role of individuals and collective actors and their judgments embraces citizens' growing influence in constructing OL. For example, Etter et al. (2016) used a quantitative sentiment analysis of evaluative judgments by 6,000 individual Twitter users to show that OL "can be constructed through the expression and negotiation of normative judgments by various evaluators" (p. 24). Hence, researchers point to the importance of MSC in the construction of OL in the sense that individuals "drop" their evaluative judgments in a large ocean of social media. Organizations are then able to receive or respond to these messages by filtering the hashtags citizens use to address organizations directly. This enables citizens to ascribe OL through their positive and negative judgments by using organizational hashtags individually.

Although these studies have enriched our understanding of OL processes, in particular the role of civil society discourses (Etter et al., 2016), they miss an essential element: the ability to fully explain the role of online communities in OL judgment formation. For example, online communities such as blogs give citizens the opportunity to contribute to the public debate through democratic dialogue (Moe, 2010; Rettberg, 2008). Social media technologies enable users to make their knowledge visible to other citizens (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) and to discuss certain topics with (likeminded) authors and participants (Papacharissi, 2002). As a result, citizens consult blogs because they offer in-depth information that goes beyond information provided by traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Moreover, citizens can collectively use Facebook groups and blogs to signal their support for a boycott of an organization (de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014).

It is also important to note that likeminded communities may reach a state of false consensus if the author(s) and participants lose sight of the opinions and characteristics of the viewpoints outside their online community (Wojcieszak, 2008). Citizens can end up in filter bubbles and echo chambers that create the impression that a large group of citizens have the same opinion (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). Despite these negative aspects, we conclude that online communities still provide an important space for citizens to construct OL through MSC.

In particular, online-mediated OL judgments produced in online communities as part of MSC can enrich the multilevel theory of OL. MSC relates to the freedom of production (e.g., online content is self-generated by citizens), distribution (e.g., content is spread through preferred channels of citizens), and response (e.g., citizens decide whether they want to receive content or respond to content shared by others) by many that communicate with many (Castells, 2007). This means that citizens produce content online that "potentially challenges corporate control of communication and may change power relationships in the communication sphere" (Castells, 2011, p. 783). Accordingly, citizens who criticize and/or support organizations through their online-mediated OL judgments in online communities (e.g., product reviews; comments on organizational products, services, and actions) challenge the inside-out perspective of OL.

We link our approach to Castells' (2007) bottle metaphor by stating that, currently, even more bottles are drifting out in the ocean, and their contents are influencing the construction of OL in unexpected ways. Four elements are essential to this outside-in approach to constructing OL. (1) These bottles contain messages about organizational products, services, and actions that are "dropped" in online

communities as part of an interactive group activity. (2) Citizens, not organizations, have written and shared these messages. (3) Citizens who share, read, and discuss these messages may ascribe (or discredit) OL without an organization being in a position to motivate (or stop) them. And (4) citizens do not exclusively rely on the perceived benefits by organizations (e.g., payment or cost reduction) to ascribe legitimacy. In sum, we propose that citizens have developed their own (independent) process in constructing OL through MSC in online communities.

We argue that the multilevel approach to OL does not consider social actors who ascribe or discredit OL through their online-mediated OL judgments in online communities. To enhance the multilevel approach to OL, we draw on legitimacy and communication studies related to the concept of MSC as described by Castells (2007, 2011). A systematic review of these studies may provide more insight into important issues and aspects and, above all, into connected themes that lead to the identification of sensitizing concepts. Thus, our goal is to connect research in both fields to understand its foundations, relations, and gaps based on the sensitizing concepts that will emerge.

We have structured this research as follows. After a general exploration of the literature in the first part of this article, we will present our systematic review of empirical studies from the OL and MSC fields based on an analysis through continuous comparison (e.g., Bowen, 2006). We considered a selection of empirical studies ( $n = 392$ ) published from 1975 to 2015 in the fields of OL and MSC that were gathered from Web of Science (WoS) through April 2016. After an initial evaluation, we analyzed abstracts, keywords, theoretical frameworks, and conclusions through thematic analysis of the final sample of studies in OL and MSC ( $n = 177$ ). We then created an overview of the relevant themes and patterns. We will discuss three sensitizing concepts that we derived from the analysis of the literature. Finally, we will discuss our findings and offer a research agenda for online-mediated OL judgments based on MSC.

### **Methodology**

To close the gap regarding the influence of MSC on the construction of OL through online-mediated OL judgments in online communities, we chose to apply a qualitative, explorative, non-content-analysis approach to identify sensitizing concepts in both streams of literature. These concepts reflect historical and current ideas derived from the literature on OL and MSC. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, our systematic review is based on a quantitative selection of OL and MSC studies over a 30-year period, which we used to identify various sensitizing concepts and themes.

To minimize bias during the process, we applied the stepwise approach of Denyer and Tranfield (2009), who suggest using a quantitative synthesis (five-step system) to highlight regularities and discrepancies in the data. Initially, we carried out an explorative preliminary study to base Step 1 (question formulation). We then translated the results from that study into search queries we used to systematically review it. We applied the following steps: (2) locating studies; (3) selecting and evaluating studies; (4) analyzing and synthesizing; and (5) reporting results. We adjusted the original five-step system to base Step 1 (question formulation) on the preliminary exploratory literature review, and we partially carried out Step 5 (reporting and using results), as we will use the results (sensitizing concepts)

to further investigate the influence of MSC on the construction of OL. Finally, we adopted Patton's (1980) idea of inductive analysis to identify emerging "patterns, themes, and categories of analysis" (p. 306). Based on this analysis of emerging themes within the literature, we identified sensitizing concepts that support us in gaining a more general sense of reference and guidance for future empirical research (Blumer, 1954).

### ***Sampling Strategy: Locating Studies***

We systematically reviewed articles published in scientific journals between January 1975 and November 2015 to develop common ground in the areas of research (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). We gathered data from WoS between November 2015 and April 2016. We chose to use WoS because of the broad variety of articles it indexes from fields such as business administration, social sciences, and communication studies. We used a three-step data-collection process.

First, we selected articles using the search terms "organizational legitimacy" and "mass self-communication." Our first search query resulted in 286 articles from academic journals in the fields of business and economics, social sciences, sociology, social issues, public administration, communication, computer science, and information science and communication. The second search query resulted in only three articles. We extended this search by using additional search terms related to both (organizational) legitimacy and MSC. These keywords were based on the preliminary exploratory literature review conducted between April 2015 and June 2015. Table 1 provides an overview of the findings per search query/string.

***Table 1. Overview of Additional Search Queries for MSC.***

<b>Search Query</b>	<b>Articles Found (WoS)</b>
Social media + legitimacy	33
Social media + organizational legitimacy	2
Social networks + legitimacy	16
Web 2.0 + legitimacy	2
Social media + stakeholders	50
Communication technology + legitimacy	1
Information technology + legitimacy	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>

Second, we imported all selected articles into Mendeley (2015) for further analysis and divided them into two categories: organizational legitimacy ( $n = 286$ ) and mass self-communication ( $n = 112$ ). We then used the search terms in MSC to merge all the selected articles into one group. During this merging process, we eliminated six duplicate articles. We systematically scanned abstracts, author keywords, theoretical frameworks, and conclusions of the articles from both groups for main topics based on the preliminary exploratory literature review (legitimacy, interaction, participation, audiences, social media, empowerment, and online communities) and tagged them with related keywords.

We eliminated abstracts or introductions from OL articles that did not explicitly mention "organizational legitimacy" or "legitimacy" as part of the theoretical framework. We also eliminated MSC articles related to social network theory based on off-line and non-Web-related cases, as well as abstracts or introductions from MSC studies that did not explicitly mention one of the chosen keywords from the preliminary research (legitimacy, interaction, participation, audiences, social media, empowerment, and online communities). The final sample consisted of 101 articles from the OL stream and 76 articles from the MSC stream.<sup>3</sup>

Third, we divided the final sample of 177 articles into two groups and coded them based on author keywords, theoretical frameworks, and conclusions. We then conducted a thematic analysis to identify key themes, patterns, and sensitizing concepts in both streams (Boyatzis, 1998). The sample included articles from 78 academic journals (45 in the OL group and 33 in the MSC group). Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of the domains and names of academic journals selected from the chosen period (1975–2015) in both streams of literature (see Appendices<sup>4</sup> A and B for all the reviewed articles and their assigned codes for the OL and MSC streams of literature, respectively).

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.dropbox.com/s/hcoa01x8j5rtfqe/Extended\\_Bibliography\\_Literature\\_Review.docx?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/hcoa01x8j5rtfqe/Extended_Bibliography_Literature_Review.docx?dl=0)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.dropbox.com/s/5ni7xglfo1suyb9/Appendices\\_AandB.docx?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/5ni7xglfo1suyb9/Appendices_AandB.docx?dl=0)



**Table 2. Overview of Research Domains and Journals in the OL Stream.**

Domain	Journal(s)	Article(s)
Management	<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	7
	<i>Academy of Management Review</i>	6
	<i>Accounting, Organizations and Society</i>	2
	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	5
	<i>Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences</i>	2
	<i>International Business Review</i>	2
	<i>Journal of Business Venturing</i>	2
	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	4
	<i>Organization Science</i>	11
	<i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	2
	<i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	2
	<i>Voluntas</i>	2
Business ethics	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	18
	<i>Business &amp; Society</i>	5
Miscellaneous	<i>Academy of Management Proceedings; Academy of Management Learning and Education; Academy of Management Perspectives; Accounting, Auditing &amp; Accountability Journal; Australian Economic History Review; British Journal of Management; Business Ethics Quarterly; Chinese Management Studies; Corporate Communications; Corporate Governance; Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice; European Sport Management Quarterly; Global Strategy Journal; Group &amp; Organization Management; Human Relations; Human Resource Management Review; Journal of Applied Communication Research; Journal of Business Research; Journal of Cleaner Production; Journal of Consumer Research; Journal of International Management; Journal of Product Innovation Management; Journal of Studies in International Education; Journal of World Business; Management Decision; Management Science; Minerva; The Pacific Sociological Review; Research in Organizational Behavior; Strategic Organization; Sustainability</i>	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>101</b>

**Table 3. Overview of Research Domains and Journals in the MSC Stream.**

Domain	Journal(s)	Article(s)
Communication	<i>Business Horizons</i>	3
	<i>Information, Communication &amp; Society</i>	3
	<i>New Media &amp; Society</i>	8
	<i>Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly</i>	2
Public relations	<i>Journal of Public Relation Research</i>	3
	<i>Public Relations Review</i>	21
Management	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	5
	<i>Organization Studies</i>	3
Business ethics	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	4
Miscellaneous	<i>The American Review of Public Administration; Australian Journal of International Affairs; Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW); Comunicar; Decision Support Systems; Environmental Health; Information Systems Frontiers; The Information Society; Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science; International Marketing Review; Journal of Accounting Research; Journal of Advertising; Journal of Applied Communication Research; Journal of Business and Technical Communication; Journal of Communication; Journal of Computer Information Systems; Journal of Management Studies; Journal of Marketing; Journal of the Association for Information Systems; Management Communication Quarterly; Management Decision; Online Information Review; Policing and Society; The Sociological Review</i>	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>76</b>

## Results

We set out to gain a deeper understanding of the influence MSC has on the construction of OL through online-mediated OL judgments in online communities. In doing so, we drew upon (1) OL and (2) developing theories on interactional approaches within social media focusing on MSC. We analyzed sensitizing concepts and themes from the two streams of literature through a systematic review of abstracts, author keywords, theoretical frameworks, and conclusions from 177 academic articles. After coding the sample, we identified 17 main themes from the sample of 101 OL articles and 18 main themes from the sample of 76 MSC articles. We covered the following domains in both streams: agriculture, (higher) education, finance, food, governmental services, health care, I(C)T, military, NGOs, petrochemical industry, and retail.

Table 4 presents a comparative overview of the themes and sensitizing concepts found in each stream. We further elaborate on these themes in OL and MSC and discuss the sensitizing concepts that

emerged according to the three dimensions: (1) Who constructs OL? This dimension addresses who initiates and constructs OL. (2) What factors influence the construction of OL? This dimension deals with important elements linked to OL which shape its construction. (3) How is OL constructed? This dimension identifies the various ways and strategies through which OL is constructed.

**Table 4. Sensitizing Concepts in OL and MSC Literature (1975–2015).**

Comparison of OL ( $n = 101$ ) and MSC ( $n = 76$ ) Streams			
Dimension	OL Stream (17 themes)	MSC Stream (18 themes)	Sensitizing Concepts in Both Streams
<i>Who</i>	Activist groups (9) Audiences (37)	Audiences (31) Online communities (10) User-producers (2)	Audiences - One to many vs. many to many
<i>What</i>	Authority (19) Crisis (17) Evaluative approach (22) Innovation (15) Media (4) Power (21) Social media (4) Stakeholder management (38) (Stakeholder) engagement (16)	Authority (12) Crisis communication (16) Convergence culture (3) Empowerment (7) Innovation (10) Organizational learning (3) Power (19) Social media (47) Stakeholder communication (33) (Stakeholder) engagement (30)	Authority Crisis (communication) Power/Empowerment Innovation Stakeholder communication & engagement
<i>How</i>	Communication strategies: - Decoupling (16) - Impression management (20) - Isomorphism (256) - Symbolic management (18)  Participation (27) Interaction (51)	Communication strategies: - Dialogic (13) - Symbolic management (6) - Web care (3)  Participation (22) Interaction (37)	Communication strategies: - Decoupling vs. dialogue - Impression management vs. two way - Communication & Web care - Symbolic management  Participation (active vs. passive) Interaction (push vs. pull)

### ***Sensitizing Concepts and Themes in Both Streams***

As stated previously, identifying sensitizing concepts provided us with a theory-based analytical framework for narrowing down and focusing on essential themes in both streams of literature. Through the method of constant comparison, three sensitizing concepts emerged in the literature in OL and MSC. These are directly related to the three dimensions: who, what and how? We will briefly elaborate on each of them in the following sections.

#### *Community-Mediated Constituency*

The concept of community-mediated constituency refers to the supportive or harmful influence of collective interactional activities. These include the exchange of evaluative judgments about organizational products, services, and actions by participants in online communities (e.g., followers of a blog or Facebook group) on the construction of OL.

OL studies (e.g., De Blasio, 2007; Drori & Honig, 2013) address participation in terms of organizations involving different stakeholder groups to evaluate organizational processes or legitimate actions. MSC studies (e.g., de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Velasquez, 2012) primarily examine how information cascades shape participation in online (political) discussions. Scholars (e.g., Frame & Brachotte, 2015; Valtysson, 2012) have pointed out how organizational and political leaders can strengthen legitimacy processes: (1) through authentic participation (e.g., sharing personal and public information with external stakeholders on Twitter) and (2) through acknowledging the influence of creative audiences (e.g., citizens who "remix" (organizational) information based on their own opinions and ideas and share this information with other citizens on nonorganizational social media platforms). In addition, Kaplan and Haenlein (2014) discuss the benefit of collaborative projects and employee-to-employee interactions via wikis, social bookmarking sites, forums, and review sites in the construction of OL.

In sum, the organizing entity that initiates the construction of OL has a different focus in each stream of literature. More recent OL studies point to the influence of legitimacy judgments made by citizens in the construction of OL (e.g., Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Finch, Deephouse, & Varella, 2015). However, the larger body of OL studies suggests constructing OL primarily from an inside-out perspective (e.g., Castelló & Galang, 2012; Panwar, Paul, Nybakk, Hansen, & Thompson, 2013). This approach leads scholars to focus on the organization, its management, and employees as initiators, developers, and sharing actors in the construction process of OL.

In contrast, MSC studies (e.g., Velasquez, 2012) point to the influence that citizens who interact in online communities have on intentionally or unintentionally constructing OL. Others (e.g., Whelan et al., 2013) have identified citizens who discuss organizational topics, such as corporate social responsibility in social-media-augmented public arenas of citizenship. According to Whelan et al. (2013), these public arenas are generally part of social media platforms by companies who own and/or control social media technologies (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) in which other organizations, stakeholders, and individual citizens can participate. We conclude that this community-based group of citizens can become a body of

constituency. Citizens are considered constituents in these online communities because they support and represent organizations or criticize and interfere with their norms, beliefs, and actions.

### *Audience Engagement Dilemmas*

The concept of audience engagement dilemmas refers to the problem organizations encounter when determining (1) who their audiences are in independent online communities, (2) how to engage with these audiences, and (3) how to cope with OL judgments made by those audiences in online communities. The OL literature (e.g., Elsbach, 1993; Khaire, 2014) also considers external stakeholders, such as consumers, to be audiences. Researchers (e.g., Aerts & Cormier, 2009; Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011) have discussed how organizations can engage or communicate with stakeholders via traditional media efforts or online. However, based on prior research, Bolívar (2009) points out that only a few companies use their own Web-based platforms to engage with stakeholders.

In the MSC sample of the literature, scholars (e.g., Auger, 2013; Wiklund, 2005) focused more on how the use of new media influences the relationship between organizations, governments, and citizens. For example, they address the use of social media to advocate organizational standpoints via Twitter and to provide feedback to stakeholders via Facebook (Auger, 2013), or the use of municipal websites to foster deliberative e-governmental activities (Wiklund, 2005). Other authors (e.g., de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012) address how the influence of Internet audiences can construct legitimacy or plunge it into crisis, especially user-producers (e.g., citizens) who create and share harmful content about an organization via social media.

Articles from both streams point out direct dilemmas faced by (managers of) organizations with respect to managerial strategies to restore legitimacy after a social media crisis (e.g., Lancaster & Boyd, 2015). In particular, they question how (managers of) organizations should address their external audiences: Through which media channels? Directly or indirectly? As a group or individually? Researchers suggest that engagement with online audiences is a valuable response strategy (e.g., Colleoni, 2013; Moog, Spicer, & Böhm, 2015). However, findings from the literature do not demonstrate how organizations manage and react to the continuous stream of online-mediated OL judgments constructed by authors and participants in online communities.

Hence, the concept of audience engagement dilemmas describes the ambiguous power relationship between organizations and external stakeholders when the latter actively participate in online communities that are not company owned (e.g., blogs or Facebook groups created by citizens). It identifies the extent to which organizations engage with external stakeholders to construct OL. More specifically, it also addresses the dilemma organizations face as to whether they should respond to or engage in discussions that include online-mediated OL judgments made by citizens in online communities, such as nonorganizational special-interest blogs.

*Influencer-Generated Legitimacy*

The concept of influencer-generated legitimacy refers to rules and routines around interactional activities initiated by influential individual citizens (e.g., authors of blogs or highly active contributors) in online communities through MSC, which can influence the construction of OL in a positive or negative manner. OL studies (e.g., Drori & Honig, 2013; Kitchener, 2002) discuss the role of influential individuals within organizations (e.g., key professionals) and their power struggles with rival colleagues who compete for managerial attention, or the influential role of the business press, executives, or consultants in constructing OL. In contrast, scholars in the MSC stream (Saxton & Wang, 2014; Veil et al., 2012) point to the influence of content created or shared by citizens and, specifically, user-producers (e.g., bloggers or influential participants) on social media platforms.

The OL stream of the literature often links organizations' strategic communication approaches to isomorphism (adapting similar "proven" approaches from other organizations to respond to the environment), symbolic management approaches like decoupling (saying one thing and doing another), and impression management (e.g., Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Fiss & Zajac, 2014). We could not identify these terms in the MSC literature. Still, we can link certain themes to each other. It is notable that OL articles—which investigate issues such as isomorphism, decoupling, symbolic management, and impression management—often present cases grounded in crisis situations (e.g., Bansal & Kistruck, 2006; Lamin & Zaheer, 2011). These key elements are also evident in MSC studies, but in relation to search terms like "crisis," "crisis communication," or "crisis management" (e.g., Murthy & Longwell, 2013; Schwarz, 2012).

Although OL studies (e.g., Lancaster & Boyd, 2015; Wang, 2010) tend to address how organizations and management have dealt with such crises, MSC studies (e.g., Freberg, Palenchar, & Veil, 2013; Veil et al., 2012) focus on how organizations can use social media platforms to overcome crises. In particular, Freberg et al. (2013) point to the important role of an organization's stakeholders who become independent social media influencers through their "strong, credible, and vocal presence online through multiple social media platforms such as blogs, social networking sites, and web sites" (p. 183). In addition, MSC scholars (e.g., Miconi, 2015; Moreno, Navarro, Tench, & Zerfass, 2015) have examined the influence that content shared by user-producers via social media has on organizations. User-producers become "opinion leaders who can use their online platforms to diffuse information and affect the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences" (Moreno et al., 2015, p. 246). One example of this is through the fragmentation and polarization of (political) information shared by bloggers, leading to an "echo chamber" effect (Miconi, 2015).

In conclusion, influencer-generated legitimacy is often related to individual user-producers who can be either an influential spokesperson within an online community (e.g., authors like bloggers, online community managers) or highly active members of an online community (e.g., followers of blogs with high participation and contribution rates). We identified these citizens' participation and/or interaction as symbolic actions that can influence organizations in a supportive or harmful way.

The analysis shows that there are strong interlinkages between the two streams of literature. The use of sensitizing concepts allows us to see that the same concepts are used in both streams but in different ways. For example, "power" in the OL literature is used from the viewpoint that individuals in organizations (e.g., managers or influential employees) construct or influence OL through communicative (powerful) practices, such as symbolic management approaches, which (can) lead to organizational crises or are intended to manage crisis situations. In addition, the OL body of literature also identifies powerful agents, such as the business press, that support or influence the process of constructing OL. In contrast, power in the MSC literature is discussed in relation to empowered and creative audiences who "make up their own minds" when it comes to ascribing legitimacy to organizations and their products, services, and actions. The OL stream mainly focuses on how to influence OL and use OL processes from an inside-out perspective, whereas MSC studies discuss the influence of user-generated content and the influencing role of creative audiences who construct OL from an outside-in perspective. These citizens' participation and interaction in online communities, and their independent production of OL judgments individually and collectively, give rise to independent arenas of OL (e.g., online communities) in which citizens' produce, share, and discuss online-mediated OL judgments with likeminded others.

Based on this analysis, we have identified three sensitizing concepts (see Table 5) that are particularly important in terms of linking both strands of literature: (1) community-mediated constituency, (2) audience engagement dilemmas, and (3) influencer-generated legitimacy.

### **Conclusion and Further Research**

In this study, we systematically reviewed the literature in the field of OL and MSC to identify sensitizing concepts and themes. A preliminary literature study found that interaction in online communities and the production of content by citizens influence how an external audience perceives an organization. Online-mediated OL judgments made by individual influencers or through collective interaction by citizens in online communities can have a direct or indirect influence on OL. Hence, OL is broadened to include the inadvertent participation of the public, who act, individually and collectively, as evaluating agents of legitimacy through the medium of social media, which is an element of MSC. Their online-mediated OL judgments about company products, services, and actions can be supportive but can also plunge organizations into crisis by creating information cascades on social media. Finally, companies have to decide how and where to respond to the continuous stream of online-mediated OL judgments coming from citizens in online communities. Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers some insight into the influence of MSC on the construction of OL. The analysis was open-ended in the sense that there were no prior theoretical expectations about which concepts would emerge as important.

**Table 5. Perspectives and Definitions of the Sensitizing Concepts.**

Sensitizing Concept	Perspective	Definition
Community-mediated constituency	Outside in (audience-driven; e.g., participants of blogs)	“Community-mediated constituency” refers to the supportive or harmful influence that collective interactional activities—such as the exchange of evaluative judgments about organizational products, services, and actions—by participants of online communities (e.g., followers of a blog) has on the construction of OL.
Audience engagement dilemmas	Inside out (company driven; organizations)	“Audience engagement dilemmas” describes the ambiguous relationship between organizations and external stakeholders (e.g., authors and participants in online communities such as blogs). It identifies the extent to which organizations can be either passive or active in engaging with external stakeholders to construct OL. It also addresses the dilemma of organizations to engage or not engage in external discussion around their organizational products, services, and actions.
Influencer-generated legitimacy	Outside in (influencer driven; e.g., influencers such as bloggers or highly active contributors)	“Influencer-generated legitimacy” refers to rules and routines around interactional activities initiated by influential individual users (e.g., authors of blogs or highly active contributors) in online communities through MSC, which can positively or negatively influence the construction of OL.

MSC may be relevant for constructing OL in today’s global organizational landscape. We addressed the phenomenon of a developing shift in the construction of OL—in particular, online-mediated OL judgments emergent in MSC—by defining three sensitizing concepts that appeared in both streams of literature. These sensitizing concepts can be used in future studies as a point of departure for creating a conceptual framework. This framework can be used to identify emerging routines in the construction of OL through online-mediated OL judgments emergent in MSC by authors and participants in online communities.

First, our contribution to theory at this point is conceptual. Further research is needed to reveal if and how these sensitizing concepts appear and are dealt with in practice. Future research in the direction



of online-mediated OL judgments as part of MSC could use these concepts to analyze communication and interaction among citizens and organizations, and citizens within online communities. There is a particular need for qualitative studies that further explore the impact of the formation of online-mediated OL judgments among various stakeholders (e.g., citizens, organizations) within online communities, such as special-interest blogs or Facebook groups.

In addition, scholars (Weber, Fulk, & Monge, 2016) have recently started to address the role of social networks and online communities as new organizational forms that provide promising research avenues. These research avenues might support the development of subthemes that will produce new theoretical concepts about the influence of online-mediated OL judgments emergent in MSC on OL.

### ***Limitations***

This study was limited to scientific articles from Web of Science and was based on literature published between January 1975 and November 2015 (articles were collected through April 2016). Future studies should also look at other sources, or cross-reference with other databases such as Google Scholar, to gain a broader perspective of the topic.

We also acknowledge that our focus on online communities—in particular, on special-interest blogs and Facebook groups—ignores other social media (e.g., the role of microblogs such as Twitter in the construction of online-mediated OL judgments). Microblogs such as Twitter are not perceived as places to share or discuss in-depth, special interest topics (Webb & Wang, 2013). This might imply that the applicability of the three sensitizing concepts is limited to online communities and publicly expressed legitimacy judgments.

Overall, this article contributes to recent discussions in organizational literature about the influence of evaluative judgments by social actors on the construction of OL. Our interdisciplinary approach helped us to gain more understanding of the difference between organizational-driven and audience-driven constructions in OL, in particular, in online communities. The essence of MSC (i.e., many-to-many communication) enabled us to derive three sensitizing concepts from the two streams of literature that capture the construction of OL in online communities.

Future research is required to empirically test the sensitizing concepts we have developed. A further study could empirically examine how OL is constructed through online-mediated OL judgments in online communities. In addition, future studies could focus on identifying how companies cope with the independent production of online-mediated OL judgments through noncompany channels.

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