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When Do Evaluators Publicly Express Their Legitimacy Judgments? An Inquiry into the Role of Peer Endorsement and Evaluative Mode

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Abstract. Legitimacy theory describes how individuals evaluate an organization's behavior, form propriety evaluations, and subsequently decide whether to publicly express their legitimacy judgments. These individual judgments are influenced by sources of collective validity, for example, from recognized authority or from peer endorsement. Whereas most research on this topic has focused on the effects of authority, we study the influence of peer endorsement on the public expression of legitimacy judgments. Additionally, we assess evaluators' preparedness to expend cognitive effort, that is, their evaluative mode, as an important condition under which judgment expressions are made. We present a set of three vignette experiments and one field study, all situated in social media that are quickly becoming the dominant setting for the expression of legitimacy judgments. This research provides new evidence that peer endorsement stimulates evaluators to express their judgments, particularly for evaluators who expend limited cognitive effort. Additionally, we find that evaluators in the active and passive evaluative modes act differently when their propriety evaluations are based on instrumental, moral, or relational considerations. These findings extend current legitimacy theory about how peer endorsement functions as a source of validity and when individual evaluators decide to publicly express their legitimacy judgments. This is important because individuals' public expressions can bring about a cascade of judgments that change the consensus on an organization's legitimacy, potentially contributing to institutional change.

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Introduction

The individual level of legitimacy theory aims to explain how and when people form a propriety evaluation and publicly express their judgment on a legitimacy object, such as an organization (Tost 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015, Suddaby et al. 2017, Jahn et al. 2020, Haack et al. 2021). Individual judgment is influenced by collective validity, either in the form of approval by recognized authority, such as governmental regulators, or in the form of endorsement by peers, such as when a common opinion is shared (Dornbusch and Scott 1975, Johnson et al. 2006, Bitektine and Haack 2015, Suddaby et al. 2017). Whereas scholars have mainly focused on the influence of authority on individual legitimacy judgment (Dornbusch and Scott 1975, Zelditch and Walker 2000, Johnson et al. 2006, Bitektine and Haack 2015), there is limited theoretical explanation of the influence of peer endorsement (Haack et al. 2021). It is essential to understand this influence because the social environment plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' judgments, for example, through making certain topics salient or highlighting a dominant opinion (Kruglanski 1990, Johnson et al. 2006). Hence, a better understanding of the role of peer endorsement advances our comprehension of the social nature of individual legitimacy judgment.

Besides its effect on individuals' judgment formation, peer endorsement may have a particularly crucial role in evaluators' decisions to publicly express

those judgments. Evaluators tend to either conform to the dominant social opinion or silence deviant judgments (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Haack et al. 2021). Theorizing on this point is underdeveloped but of great importance to adequately account for the relationship between individual judgment, organizational legitimacy, and ultimately, institutional change (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Haack et al. 2021). At the individual level, evaluators only exert pressure on the legitimacy object if they act on their propriety evaluation, in particular by publicly voicing their judgment. At the collective level, individuals' public expressions can fuel a cascade of legitimacy judgments that reshape the collective validity, changing the consensus about the legitimacy of an organization (Lee and Chun 2016, Haack et al. 2021). As such, evaluators taking the step to publicly express their legitimacy judgments play a vital role in strengthening or weakening pressure for legitimacy objects to change (Haack et al. 2021). We contribute to this literature by theorizing and testing the relationship between peer endorsement and legitimacy judgment expression.

In addition, it is necessary to understand the conditions under which peer endorsement influences legitimacy judgment expression (Suddaby et al. 2017). Evaluators will differ in their motivations and states at the time of deciding to make their judgment public. In particular, evaluators differ in their evaluative mode: their preparedness to expend cognitive effort when deciding to make their legitimacy judgment publicly known (Tost 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015). Evaluators in passive mode, expending minimal cognitive effort, follow different motivations and cues than evaluators in active mode who deliberate on the matter more deeply (Bitektine and Haack 2015).

The main purpose of this study is therefore to better understand how peer endorsement influences evaluators' decisions to publicly express their legitimacy judgments while accounting for their evaluative mode. To address this purpose, we present three vignette experiments and one field study, all situated in a social media setting typical of recent protest campaigns targeting organizations. Social media are an intriguing setting to study peer endorsement's influence as, notably, the number and visibility of peer endorsements that evaluators are confronted with has increased significantly since their advent (Toubiana and Zietsma 2017, Etter et al. 2019, Wang et al. 2021). At the same time, social media lower the threshold for evaluators to publicly express their own legitimacy judgments and reach a broad audience beyond their usual personal relations (Etter et al. 2019, Wang et al. 2021). This low threshold has led to the situation where most public legitimacy expressions are typically from evaluators that are in passive mode (van den Broek et al. 2017), who are potentially more sensitive to peer endorsement cues as heuristics for collective validity.

Our study extends the mediation model of Bitektine and Haack (2015) of legitimacy judgment that highlights the influence of collective validity on individuals' propriety evaluation and judgment expression. First, we theorize and test the influence of two salient cues that are related to the visual presentation of the peer endorsements, namely the endorsements' visual attractiveness and the endorsers' identifiability. Visual attractiveness relates to the visual richness of the information presented about the peer endorsements, including graphical elements, while identifiability is the extent to which the endorsers' personal identity is presented to the evaluator. These peer endorsement cues may function as cognitive shortcuts for validity beliefs. Second, we extend theory on evaluators' cognitive effort (Tost 2011, Haack et al. 2014, Bitektine and Haack 2015) by theorizing and testing whether evaluators in passive mode are more sensitive to peer endorsement cues and specific dimensions of propriety evaluation when expressing a legitimacy judgment than evaluators in active mode are. Although evaluators in both active and passive mode contribute to cascades, we find that they are motivated differently to express their legitimacy judgments. Passive evaluators are particularly influenced by validation through peer endorsement cues and via propriety through relational evaluations. Active evaluators are less influenced to express their legitimacy judgments by peer endorsement cues and more focused on instrumental and moral evaluations. These findings are important to organizations because they provide nuanced information about why and when people decide to express judgments that may add weight to calls to delegitimize an organization.

Theory

Legitimacy-as-Perception and the Public Expression of Legitimacy Judgments

There has been increased attention for the microfoundations of institutional processes (Powell and Colyvas 2008, Felin et al. 2015, Zucker and Schilke 2020), including in how individuals evaluate organizations' behavior on social media platforms (Toubiana and Zietsma 2017, Etter et al. 2019, Haack et al. 2021, Wang et al. 2021). A key construct in this social evaluation literature is legitimacy, which is defined as the "the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions" (Deephouse et al. 2017, p. 9). This definition conceptualizes legitimacy as an organization's property or resource, but legitimacy is also considered to be evaluators' perception of how legitimate an entity is (Suddaby et al. 2017).

Our study is rooted in this legitimacy-as-perception perspective, which considers legitimacy as a form of socio-cognitive evaluation both on an individual and a collective level (Bitektine 2011, Tost 2011, Haack et al. 2014, Bitektine and Haack 2015, Suddaby et al. 2017, Jahn et al. 2020). This perspective stresses the cross-level nature of legitimacy judgments and subsequent observable actions (Bitektine 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015, Suddaby et al. 2017): individual evaluators are influenced by collective, institutionalized validity, and, in turn, the aggregation of individual judgments may lead to a new consensus that also influences the collective validation of an organization's legitimacy (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Haack et al. 2021). Evaluators decide to express their legitimacy judgment based on their own propriety evaluation and their perception of the collective validity (Bitektine and Haack 2015). Legitimacy judgments can range from strong forms of positive to strong forms of negative legitimacy judgments (Suddaby et al. 2017).

Understanding why and how individual evaluators decide to express their legitimacy judgment is of theoretical importance, because propriety evaluations can only affect the focal legitimacy object, collective validation institutes, or other evaluators, if they are expressed publicly; in this way evaluators can consider other individuals' judgments to be a source of validity (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Haack et al. 2021). When evaluators disagree with a preexisting collective validity but refrain from expressing their judgments, other evaluators could be led to believe that dissenting ideas are rare within the collectivity (Scheufele and Moy 2000, Clemente and Roulet 2015). Dissenting propriety evaluations from peers that are made publicly visible may influence evaluators' standpoint and, if they perceive that the consensus may be shifting, this could make them more likely to decide to voice their judgment too, whereby it might suffice to reveal their deviating legitimacy judgments to initiate a cascade of contested legitimacy (Haack et al. 2021).

Sources of Validity: Authorization and Peer Endorsement

A key question in legitimacy research is under which circumstances evaluators perceive a collective judgment to be valid. Scholars distinguish between two sources of validity: authorization and peer endorsement (Johnson et al. 2006). Authorization refers to the validation by recognized, higher authorities, such as traditional media, regulators, and the judicial system (Bitektine and Haack 2015). In contrast, peer endorsement is the validation by similar others to the focal evaluator (Walker et al. 1986, Zelditch 2001, Johnson 2004, Johnson et al. 2006). The legitimization—or indeed de-legitimization—of organizations is strengthened by validation by both authorization and peer endorsement.

Peer endorsement influences both evaluators' propriety evaluations and their public expression of legitimacy judgments (Walker et al. 1986, Tost 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015), but there is limited scholarly attention for how peer endorsements influence the publicly visible expression of legitimacy judgments, or the boundary conditions under which this influence takes place. The psychological mechanism underlying peer endorsement is informational social influence, also termed social proof (Rao et al. 2001, Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). This is an individual compliance strategy that validates the correctness of evaluators' judgments and actions based on social comparison with similar others. As a cognitive heuristic it allows evaluators to swiftly decide on judgments and actions despite limited information or personal involvement.

Peer Endorsement and Evaluative Mode

Research suggests that evaluators often lack cognitive attention while making a legitimacy judgment. They often make evaluations intuitively, basing them on cognitive heuristics (Tost 2011; Haack et al. 2014, 2021; Bitektine and Haack 2015; Bundy and Pfarrer 2015). Research in the cognitive sciences discerns two modes of information processing for evaluation and decision making, labeled by a variety of terms (Chaiken and Trope 1999, Stanovich and West 2000, Evans 2008, Kahneman 2011). This dual process theory implies two paths of information processing. Evaluators in the passive mode, also called System 1 thinking, follow a peripheral path and allocate limited cognitive capacity to a decision. They use a number of simplifying and efficient heuristics and refrain from delving deeply into the message arguments (Petty and Cacioppo 1986, Elsbach and Elofson 2000). Conversely, evaluators in active mode, also called System 2 thinking, follow a central cognitive path and allocate significant cognitive resources to process information and to elaborate on the content to arrive at their judgments.

Scholars have used this dual process theory to hypothesize the differences between propriety evaluations of individuals in the passive and active modes (Tost 2011, Haack et al. 2014). When evaluators are in the passive mode, they use salient cues that serve as cognitive heuristics that can either stimulate or inhibit the formation and expression of their propriety evaluation (Bitektine and Haack 2015). In contrast, evaluators in the active mode take the time to deliberate on the available information before deciding whether to voice their judgment or not.

Understanding the influence of evaluative mode on legitimacy is important to legitimacy research, as it

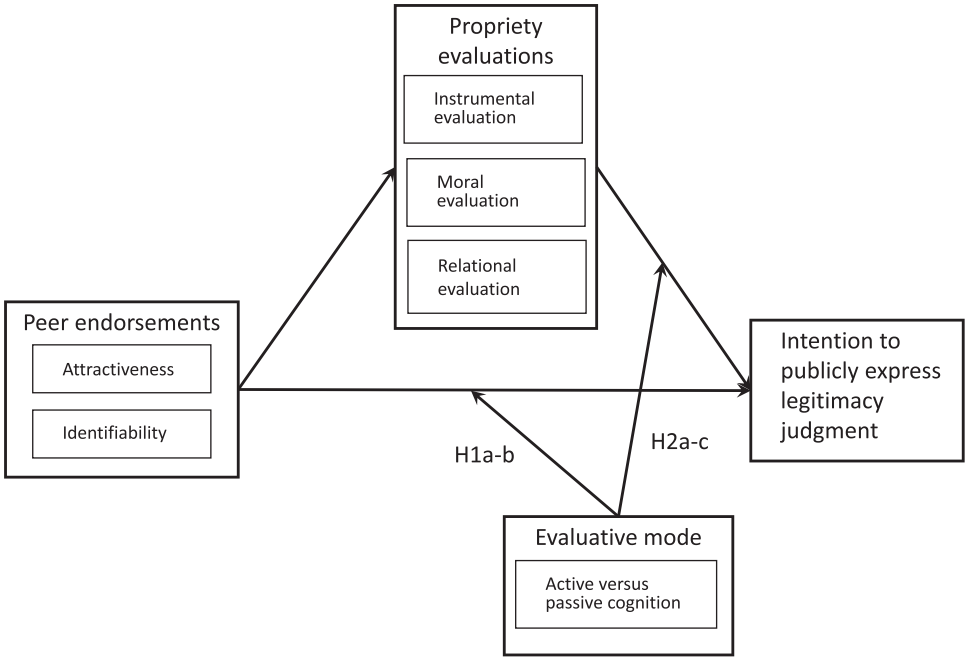
can change the relationships among validity, propriety, and the public expression of legitimacy judgments (Haack et al. 2021). We argue that the evaluative mode may interact with the influence of peer endorsements as a source of validity. Research shows that individuals in the passive evaluation mode may follow endorsements from peers as social proof (Bond et al. 2017), assuming that these peer endorsements signal personal relevance and utility (Messing and Westwood 2014).

An important question remains: when are peer endorsements a credible source of validity for evaluators in active or passive mode? Extant literature provides evidence that the amount of social information available about a source influences evaluators' validity beliefs, particularly when they are in the passive mode (Petty and Cacioppo 1986, DeBono and Harnish 1988, Pornpitakpan 2004). Although peer endorsers do not have acknowledged expertise or authority, such as journalists or scientists do, there are other attributes that enhance how their endorsement message, and how the endorser themselves, are perceived by others. On the one hand, relating to the attributes of the endorsement message, the allure with which the endorsement is presented is important, as has been shown by decades of research in communication science and marketing (Grunig 1982, Liu and Stout 1987). On the other hand, relating to the attributes of the endorser, the confidence that the perceiver has in the person providing an endorsement is strongly influenced by the quality of the social information available (Messing and Westwood 2014), whereby an anonymous endorser will inspire less confidence that an identifiable endorser will. As such, we focus on the perception of peer endorsements' attractiveness (Petty et al. 1981, Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1995, Angst and Agarwal 2009, de Vries et al. 2012) and peer endorsers' identifiability (Sia et al. 2002, Rains 2007, Berger 2014) to understand how social information from peer endorsements influence evaluators. Attractiveness is defined as the visual appeal and richness of the information presented about the peer endorsements (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1995, de Vries et al. 2012). Identifiability refers to whether the personal identity of a message sender is known to the receiver (Rains 2007, Berger 2014).

Hypothesis Development

Given these considerations, we build and test a moderated-mediation model (Figure 1) that links the moderating role of the evaluative mode to the influence of peer endorsements and propriety evaluations on the public expression of legitimacy judgments. Our model implies a direct effect of peer endorsement cues, namely of the social information relating to their attractiveness and identifiability, on the public expression of legitimacy judgments (Thomas et al. 1986, Walker et al. 1986, Tost 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015), with instrumental, moral, and relational propriety evaluations partially mediating this relationship (Walker et al. 1988, Bitektine and Haack 2015). The main argument of this mediation is that social conformity

Figure 1. Moderating Effect of Evaluative Mode on the Public Expression of Legitimacy Judgments



studies provide evidence that evaluators' propriety evaluations tend to conform to sources of validity when making judgments or decisions (Milgram 1974, Thomas et al. 1986, Muchnik et al. 2013, Bitektine and Haack 2015). We argue that these direct and indirect effects depend on the evaluative mode (active versus passive cognition). Hence, we theorize that the evaluative mode moderates the direct influence of peer endorsements on evaluators' intention to publicly express their judgments (Hypothesis 1a and b) and the mediation of this relationship through propriety evaluations (Hypothesis 2a–c).

Evaluative Mode Moderating the Relationship Between Peer Endorsement and the Public Expression of Legitimacy Judgments

There is extant empirical evidence of the influence of validity on propriety evaluations and behavior. Evaluators tend to express legitimacy judgments that they believe are valid, sometimes independent of their own personal judgment of the legitimacy object (Walker et al. 1986, Tost 2011). In an experiment on the legitimacy of a social structure, Walker et al. (1986) found that participants' behavior was directly stimulated by participants endorsing change to the social structure.

We argue that evaluative mode moderates the relationship between the peer endorsements and the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments. More so than others, evaluators in the passive mode tend to see peer endorsements as informational social influence or social proof to validate their own publicly visible behavior (Rao et al. 2001, Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). Higher levels of peer endorsement attractiveness could increase the social proof mechanism, providing not only information about what similar others think about the legitimacy object, but also rich social cues of the endorsers, increasing their credibility. Previous research demonstrates that source attractiveness may act as a salient cue to evaluators in the passive mode but might influence evaluators in the active mode less (Petty et al. 1981, Angst and Agarwal 2009). Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1995), for example, demonstrated that in an advertisement color, as visual attractiveness, can function as a cognitive heuristic for evaluators in the passive mode. Scholars also found a relationship between visual attractiveness and engagement with a website (Fortin and Dholakia 2005) and with brand-related Facebook posts (de Vries et al. 2012). Cognitive scientists indeed suggest that intuitive, fast decision making is shaped by highly visually accessible features of a decision situation (Kahneman 2003, 2011). In the same vein, we argue that high levels of visual attractiveness make the endorsements more credible to evaluators in the passive mode.

We argue that evaluators in the passive mode are more receptive to peer endorsements with high levels of source attractiveness, which they use as cognitive shortcuts, than evaluators in the active mode are. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1a. *The positive influence of the visual attractiveness of peer endorsements on the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments is stronger for evaluators in the passive mode than in the active mode.*

Similarly, we argue that the endorsers' identifiability could function as a cognitive heuristic for evaluators in the passive mode, stimulating their propensity to publicly express legitimacy judgments. We argue that particularly evaluators in the passive mode require personal information of endorsers to gain an impression of their trustworthiness as a validation source (Rains 2007, Jin 2018). Online calls to voice legitimacy judgments, for example, on social media platforms, vary substantially in how much personal information about peer endorsers they present to evaluators (Lapinski and Rimal 2005). For example, the online discussion platform Reddit provides limited information about platform members, whereas Facebook users often communicate real names, identifiable photos, and a profile that provides other identity information. Given the presence of anonymous accounts and bots on social media (Wang et al. 2021), personal information about endorsers may function as a cue for passive evaluators that signals endorsers' trustworthiness (Rains 2007, Jin 2018). A reason is that sources that reveal their identity are perceived as more accountable for their opinion and behavior (El-Shinnawy and Vinze 1998, Wildschut et al. 2002) and as having more personal relevance than endorsements that conceal endorsers' identity (Lapinski and Rimal 2005, Bond et al. 2017).

In sum, we argue that evaluators in the passive evaluative mode will be influenced more by endorsers' identifiability than evaluators in the active mode are. Endorsers' personal information serves as trust cues that allow evaluators to infer the endorsers' integrity and accountability. Evaluators in the active mode will be less influenced by source identifiability, as they engage more with the content of the information and base their decision to make their judgment publicly visible on their own motivations. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1b. *The positive influence of the identifiability of peer endorsers on the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments is stronger for evaluators in the passive mode than in the active mode.*

Evaluative Mode Moderating the Relationships Between Propriety Evaluations and the Public Expression of Legitimacy Judgments

On the individual level, evaluators form their own independent propriety evaluations that may lead

them to express a legitimacy judgment (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Suddaby et al. 2017). In our study, we focus on how the evaluative mode moderates the relationship between individuals' propriety evaluations and their public judgment expression. Propriety evaluations refer to an evaluator's own approval of a legitimacy object as socially acceptable (Bitektine and Haack 2015). In combination with validity beliefs, propriety evaluations motivate evaluators to express their legitimacy judgment (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Tost 2011). Although this study assumes a linear relationship between propriety evaluations and legitimacy judgment expression, there could be conditions that require a certain threshold level of the strength or confidence in an evaluator's internal propriety evaluation to motivate him or her to publicly express a legitimacy judgment (Haack et al. 2021). Those making a publicly visible judgment run the risk of social sanctions as, for example, research has demonstrated that, when decision makers think that they have a deviant opinion compared with a norm, they would only publicly disclose their opinion if they have sufficient confidence (Schilke 2018).

We discern three dimensions of propriety evaluation: instrumental, moral, and relational evaluations. The first, instrumental evaluation, requires an evaluator to understand and believe in the legitimacy object's relevance and consequences for their personal circumstances (Tost 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015). The evaluator may expect greater utility as a result of expressing their legitimacy judgment (Bitektine and Haack 2015). When people take the instrumental path to propriety evaluation, they are involved in a form of problem-focused coping, oriented toward instrumental strategies that are expected to improve their personal situation (van Zomeren et al. 2008), and they take action "for the purpose of changing reality" (Lazarus 1991, p. 48). This instrumental path is rooted in sociology's rational choice theories, which assume that evaluators act as rational agents (Kahneman 2011). From this perspective, evaluators are expected to consider their own personal circumstances and interests and make a personal cost-benefit analysis weighing alternatives in a decision situation.

There has been a lack of research on the microlevel effect of instrumental evaluations on the public expression of legitimacy judgments and the role that the evaluative mode plays in this relationship. In social movement theory (Simon et al. 1998, Klandermans 2004, Stúrmer and Simon 2004) and collective action theory (Oberschall 1993), instrumental evaluations have been recognized as a driver of the public expression of a judgment. The expectancy-value model of Klandermans (2013) provides evidence that the evaluators' willingness to publicly express a negative legitimacy judgment depends on their perception of the intended social change, and, if this change is beneficial to them, can compensate costs or risks related to expressing their judgment.

We argue that, to develop a clear picture of personal relevance to publicly express a legitimacy judgment and its likely costs and benefits, evaluators need to cognitively elaborate on the message's arguments and how these relate to their personal circumstances (Johnson and Eagly 1989, Petty and Cacioppo 1990, Meyers-Levy 1991). As rational agents, evaluators are required to consider their own interests and preferences related to judgment expression and assess to what extent the expression contributes to these (Klandermans 2013). Because this instrumental pathway toward public expression is a form of reasoned action, we argue that it requires active and deliberate reasoning from evaluators. Hence, we expect that evaluators in the active evaluative mode base their intention to publicly express their legitimacy judgment more on instrumental evaluations than evaluators in the passive evaluative mode do. In contrast, when evaluators are in the passive mode, any effects of the public judgment expression on their personal situation are likely to remain relatively ambiguous, weakening the influence of instrumental evaluations on their intention to publicly express their propriety evaluation (Johnson and Eagly 1989, Petty and Cacioppo 1990, Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1995). We therefore propose the following.

Hypothesis 2a. *The positive influence of instrumental evaluations on the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments is stronger for evaluators in the active mode than in the passive mode.*

Moral considerations are seen as a second dimension of evaluators' legitimacy evaluations (Tost 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015). Moral legitimacy evaluation is the ideological motivation to take action when evaluators see correspondence between a cause and their personal values (Klandermans 2013). Evaluators may find it important that organizations act more in line with social norms and belief systems (Bitektine and Haack 2015). Collective relative deprivation theory suggests that, when an evaluator perceives an unfair situation in which a particular group is unjustifiably disadvantaged, their willingness to express support for change increases (Grant and Brown 1995). Several experiments have confirmed the effects of collective relative deprivation theory, suggesting that evaluators compare an oppressed group's deprived condition with their own values and norms on acceptable conditions (Grant and Brown 1995).

There has, however, been little research into the effects of evaluative mode on the relationship between moral evaluations and the intention to publicly express a legitimacy judgment. Research suggests that

there are two types of information processing modes in moral judgment: a rational and controlled cognitive process and an intuitive and emotional process (Greene and Haidt 2002, Weaver et al. 2014). The first processing mode, the rational and controlled cognitive process, is traditionally associated with logical, rule-based, and deliberative moral reasoning (Weaver et al. 2014). In this active mode, evaluators engage more in reasoning about the moral situation and its consequences, requiring more cognitive effort and time (Suter and Hertwig 2011). This viewpoint highlights the substantive cognitive effort needed to process moral arguments of legitimacy-related messages. For example, evaluators may take time to understand that an organization's activities are contrary to their own moral rules and reasoning, whereby they may evaluate the organization as behaving egregiously and reprehensibly, to the extent that they decide to publicly express their judgment.

Literature on moral cognition also suggests an emotional and intuitive moral judgment process (Haidt 2001, Weaver et al. 2014, Bundy and Pfarrer 2015). This occurs spontaneously when evaluators are faced with legitimacy-related information that conflicts with their personal moral values. In such situations, evaluators in the passive mode may directly follow their moral intuition to decide whether to express their judgment publicly. In this mode, evaluators often engage in more swift, deontological reasoning, with the evaluators' moral values as a reference point (Suter and Hertwig 2011). For example, evaluators in the passive mode may quickly perceive careless organizational behavior, such as damage to the natural environment, as unjust and objectionable.

Evaluators in the active mode also experience such initial moral intuition (Suter and Hertwig 2011), but they elaborate further on this moral intuition by following a logical, rule-based, and deliberative evaluation before deciding on whether to express a judgment. In other words, we can expect their moral judgment to be reinforced by extra deliberation on the message-related arguments of the protest website, particularly focusing on the moral consequences of the target organization's activities. We therefore propose the following.

Hypothesis 2b. *The positive influence of moral evaluations on the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments is stronger for evaluators in the active mode than in the passive mode.*

A third relational dimension of legitimacy evaluations is the strength of shared identity that evaluators experience with the people affected by the legitimacy object. Accordingly, for situations where an organization's behavior has disadvantaged a group, the relational legitimacy evaluation will be based on an evaluator's social identification with that disadvantaged group (van Zomeren et al. 2008). For instance, social identity research demonstrates that potential participants are more likely to join a protest when they identify with the oppressed group (Klandermans 2013). Scholars from the social sciences consider this to be the result of in-group favoritism: the effect when people support others they perceive to belong to the same group or share similar attributes, such as interests, culture, or demographics (Turner and Reynolds 2008, van Zomeren et al. 2008).

We argue that people who do not invest time and effort to engage with the information provided are far more likely to be motivated when they perceive the disadvantaged group as "people like me." An apparent relational bond with these purported victims of an organization's egregious behavior may be felt quickly, without the need to elaborate on the information, motivating the evaluators to express their negative judgment publicly (Stúrmer and Simon 2004, Klandermans 2013). Assessing whether the purported victims are similar to the evaluator could be seen as an intuitive and quick gauge of similarity (Stanovich and West 2000, Kahneman 2011). Evaluators tend to focus on self-categorization based on identity cues when they must make judgments under time pressure (Kruglanski 1996). Such a self-categorization process is considered an automatic and intuitive pathway to the expression of legitimacy judgments in protests (Klandermans 2013). Evaluators' perceptions of events are appraised on behalf of a socially extended self, based on the evaluator's *feeling* of shared identity rather than a deliberative consideration (Neville and Reicher 2011).

When evaluating an organization's legitimacy, evaluators in the passive mode are more likely to use identity cues in the information on the purported victims as a heuristic to assess their in-group membership (Chaiken 1980, Lin et al. 2016), which is a predictor of the intention to publicly express a legitimacy judgment. In contrast, evaluators in the active mode are more likely to elaborate on the content of the message weakening the effect of relational evaluations compared with evaluators in the passive mode. We therefore propose the following.

Hypothesis 2c. *The positive influence of relational evaluations on the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments is stronger for evaluators in the passive mode than in the active mode.*

In the four studies that follow, we address the following aims.[1] Study 1 present a vignette experiment that tests the hypotheses of how evaluative mode moderates the relationship of peer endorsement cues and propriety evaluations on the intention of expressing a legitimacy judgment. In study 2, we use an experimental

design to validate study 1's use of deliberation time as a measure of evaluative mode. In study 3, we present an experiment to test competing mediation effects to further understand why evaluators in passive mode are more negatively affected by endorsers' identifiability than evaluators in active mode are, when deciding to express their legitimacy judgment. Last, study 4 is a field study whereby we examine the extent to which participants' intention to express a legitimacy judgment in an experimental setting results in actual expression in a real-world setting.

Study 1

Study Design

We tested our hypotheses in an online, between-subject vignette experiment that presented evaluators with a fictional, yet realistic, protest campaign targeting an organization. We chose an experimental approach, as the aim was to investigate the distinction between different groups of people, evaluators in the active and passive modes, in a controlled setting to expand our understanding of the boundary conditions impacting on evaluators' intentions to publicly express their legitimacy judgments. A vignette experiment is suited to our research question, as it places respondents in a lifelike scenario that intends to elicit the natural cognitive responses that may emerge in daily life. The experimental approach allowed us to reduce extraneous influences on the respondents.

Study 1 is a vignette experiment with endorsements' visual attractiveness and endorsers' identifiability as manipulations.[2] The participants interacted with a website that presented a (fictional) protest organization petitioning against slave-like working conditions in Southern European hotels, after which participants indicated their perceptions and intention to sign the online petition. The website included fictional but realistically named peer endorsements. We hired a commercial survey organization that randomly recruited 183 participants (54% women) who took part in an ex ante manipulation check and a separate sample of 154 participants (52% women) who took part in the main experiment.[3] The participants were residents of the Netherlands, aged between 18 and 87 years (with a mean age of 44.5 years) in the manipulation check, and between 18 and 77 years (with a mean age of 43.3 years) in the main experiment.[4] The participants received a small financial compensation and were not familiar with the experimental manipulations.

Procedure

After a welcome screen, participants were told that they should imagine that the protest website they would see had been sent by a member of their personal social network to ensure that the protest website's initial credibility would be typical for campaigns shared in their own social network (Jasper and Poulsen 1995). The participants were then randomly routed to one of the four treatment conditions. On the protest website, other (fictive) social media users called on consumers to sign a petition to pressure a fictional, yet realistic, accommodation booking website to stop accepting reservations at Southern European hotels with oppressive working conditions. After the manipulation, the participants completed a questionnaire about demographics, their evaluation of the protest website and their willingness to express their legitimacy judgment. A debriefing revealed the protest website's fictitiousness to the participants. We asked the participants after the debriefing if they would support the protest if it were real. This measure was significantly correlated ($p < 0.001$) with their intention to express their legitimacy evaluation before the briefing, in support of the experiment's credibility.

Measures

Independent Variables: Manipulation of Attractiveness and Identifiability. We designed an archetypical scenario of an online protest targeting an organization, following the most commonly listed method of manipulation development (Highhouse 2009). First, we conducted a frequency analysis of 110 online protests targeting organizations, randomly retrieved from the LexisNexis international English-language newspaper database over four months, to identify the most common types of protesters, target industry, and cause. We wrote three scenarios based on these features found in the newspaper database. Next, faculty members ($n = 13$) rated these scenarios on valence, credibility, and comprehensiveness. We selected the scenario with the highest overall score for the experiment's protest website.

The next step in the manipulation design was to operationalize peer endorsements' social information into the design features of the protest website, while keeping the arguments of the endorsements the same in all conditions. We created a list of 62 website features based on theory (Song and Zinkhan 2008, Voorveld et al. 2011) and asked faculty members ($n = 13$) to code the list in terms of visual attractiveness and endorser identifiability. In this way, we identified the website features that should be operationalized for effective manipulations. Results are listed in Online Appendix A.1. First, we operationalized endorsements' attractiveness by manipulating the visual attractiveness of how endorsements are presented on the protest website (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1995, de Vries et al. 2012). Following media richness theory (Daft and Lengel 1986), we manipulated the multimodality

of the endorsements on the website's discussion and signing sections, allowing multimedia in the high visual attractiveness condition, and only text in the low condition. Second, we operationalized endorsers' identifiability by adjusting website features that afford the communication of identity cues about the endorsers (Lin and Spence 2018). Endorsers' names and pictures were presented in their profiles in the discussion and signing sections in the high identifiability condition and were concealed in the low identifiability condition where endorsers had a nickname and avatar. We provide screenshots and a manipulation check in Online Appendices A.5 and A.6.

Dependent Variable. We operationalized respondents' intention to publicly express their legitimacy judgment as their intended support on the protest website. We combined seven items ($\alpha = 0.91$): five from the Product Involvement Inventory (Zaichkowsky 1994) and two from the Intention-to-Participate scale (van Stekelenburg et al. 2009). Whereas the Product Involvement Inventory is widely used in marketing, entrepreneurship, and information systems research to measure consumers' commitment to marketing campaigns (Rossiter 2002, Fortin and Dholakia 2005, Nielsen and Binder 2021), the Intention-to-Participate scale is used in social movement research and covers the intention to take part in a collective action (van Stekelenburg et al. 2009, Rees and Bamberg 2014).

Mediators. The experiment contained a questionnaire with reflective, multi-item measures of the evaluation dimensions, and control variables that captured evaluators' information processing efficiency: protest experience in the past year and age.[5] Scholars have recently developed legitimacy measurement scales (Alexiou and Wiggins 2019, Bitektine et al. 2020) that were not available when we designed and conducted our study. Instead, we measured instrumental evaluation using two items regarding an individual's personal gain from the collective action based on the instrumentality scale of van Stekelenburg et al. (2009) ($\alpha = 0.82$). We used a four-item scale to measure moral evaluation ($\alpha = 0.81$) based on the injustice scale published by van Stekelenburg et al. (2009). Relational evaluation was measured using a four-item scale ($\alpha = 0.80$) that included two items covering self-categorization theory and two items covering social identity theory (Ellemers et al. 1997, Cameron 2004). We measured all items on a five-point Likert-type scale. All items are listed in Online Appendix A.4.

Moderator. We distinguished between evaluative modes based on deliberation time (De Dreu 2003, Paxton et al. 2012, Shalvi et al. 2012). We decided to use this objective post hoc classification instead of ex ante classification by manipulation to avoid any selection or priming biases (Bargh 2016) and to allow natural responses to the experiment (Angst and Agarwal 2009). We measured the respondents' deliberation time with the experimental software, recording the time taken from first accessing the protest website to taking the decision to publicly express a legitimacy judgment.

We conducted a two-step cluster analysis to detect natural groups within the distribution of the deliberation time variable. We found an optimum at the three-cluster solution, based on the silhouette measure, 0.75, of cohesion and separation (Kaufman and Rousseeuw 2009). Two clusters comprised 64 participants in active evaluative mode and 88 participants in passive evaluative mode. The third cluster consisted of two respondents who took considerably more time (mean = 2,267.5 seconds, standard deviation = 593.3 seconds) and were added to the active evaluation group. Online Appendix A.2 provides descriptive statistics and further justification of the cluster analysis.

Results and Discussion

Mediation Analysis: Influence of Peer Endorsement on Publicly Expressing Legitimacy Judgment Through Propriety Evaluations. We started by testing our model for simple mediation, not taking the evaluative mode as a possible moderator into account. First, we tested our model's direct effect (X on Y) with ordinary least-squared (OLS) regression. Peer endorsement attractiveness was positively related to the intention to express a legitimacy judgment ($B = 4.38$, standard error (SE) = 1.66, $p < 0.01$), whereas endorser identifiability was not significantly related to the dependent variable ($B = -2.87$, SE = 1.74, $p = 0.10$). Attractiveness and identifiability were not related to any of the propriety evaluation dimensions. As we did not find any influence of the independent variables on propriety evaluations, we conclude that we did not find mediation of the relationship between peer endorsement cues and the intention to express legitimacy judgments via propriety evaluations.

Moderation Analysis. Second, we tested our moderation hypotheses of evaluative mode. The OLS regression results, including the coefficients, robust standard errors, significance levels, observations, and R^2, are provided in Table 1. The descriptive statistics are included in Online Appendix A.3.

The adjusted R^2 was very good for both groups: the active (0.71) and passive (0.62) evaluative modes and in line with expectations for controlled experiments. The moderation of the effect of endorsements on the protest website showed interesting results. We found a significant positive influence of attractiveness on the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments for those in the passive mode ($\beta = 1.52$, SE = 0.73, $p < 0.05$) and a marginally significant negative link for those in

Table 1. OLS Estimates of Peer Endorsement Cues and Propriety Evaluations on Intention to Publicly Express Legitimacy Judgment

Variables	Active evaluative mode	Passive evaluative mode	Wald test (χ^2)
Constant	−4.73 (2.64)†	5.04 (2.20)*	
Peer endorsement cues (Hypothesis 1a and b)			
Attractiveness	−1.57 (0.84)†	1.52 (0.73)*	9.14**
Identifiability	1.20 (0.82)	−0.93 (0.73)	4.60*
Propriety evaluations (Hypothesis 2a–c)			
Instrumental evaluation	1.73 (0.62)**	−0.74 (0.61)	9.19**
Moral evaluation	6.68 (0.63)***	4.14 (0.59)***	10.09**
Relational evaluation	−0.65 (0.85)	2.63 (0.62)***	15.41**
Control variables			
Age	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.07 (0.02)**	
Protest experience	1.29 (0.50)*	0.61 (0.48)	
Observations	66	88	
Adjusted R^2	0.71	0.62	

Notes. The Wald test is used to compare the groups. Estimated Beta coefficients of regressions were reported with robust standard errors in parentheses.
$^{\dagger}p < 0.1$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$, two-tailed tests.

the active mode ($\beta = -1.57$, SE = 0.84, $p < 0.1$). The Wald test indicated significant differences between both evaluative modes ($\chi^2 = 9.14$, $p < 0.01$), which supports Hypothesis 1a. In contrast, the link between identifiability and the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments was not significant for those in the passive evaluative mode ($\beta = -0.93$, SE = 0.73, $p = 0.21$) or those in the active evaluative mode ($\beta = 1.20$, SE = 0.82, $p = 0.15$), although the Wald test indicated a significant difference between both evaluative modes ($\chi^2 = 4.60$, $p < 0.05$) opposite to the direction in Hypothesis 1b.

Regarding the propriety evaluation dimensions, we found that the instrumental dimension only showed a positive effect for evaluators in the active mode (β = 1.73, SE = 0.62, $p < 0.01$). The difference between the evaluative modes is significant (χ^2 = 9.19, $p < 0.01$), and in line with Hypothesis 2a. Unexpectedly, evaluators' decision to take action was positively influenced by their moral evaluation regarding the situation for both the active ($\beta = 6.68$, SE = 0.63, $p < 0.001$) and the passive mode ($\beta = 4.14$, SE = 0.59, $p < 0.001$). As hypothesized, the Wald test indicated a significant difference between both evaluative modes (χ^2 = 10.09, $p < 0.01$). We therefore found support for Hypothesis 2b. The relationship between the relational evaluation and the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments was only significant for those in the passive evaluative mode ($\beta = 2.63$, SE = 0.62, $p < 0.001$). The Wald test confirmed a significant difference between both evaluative modes (χ^2 = 15.41, $p < 0.01$), which provides support for Hypothesis 2c.

Study 2

In study 1, we did not manipulate the participants' evaluative mode but let them deliberate naturally on the campaign website's information. The disadvantage of this approach is that we cannot be sure that the participants who took longer did so because they were deliberating more deeply. Therefore, in this online experiment we manipulated evaluative mode with evaluators' epistemic motivation, which is the desire to develop an elaborate understanding of a situation, using one's beliefs regarding knowledge and the process of building knowledge (Kruglanski 1990). Epistemic motivation strongly influences the evaluative mode that individual evaluators engage in (Kruglanski 1990). Studies show that a high level of epistemic motivation among evaluators decreases selective information use (Stuhlmacher and Champagne 2000), discourages the use of heuristics (Fiske and Neuberg 1990), and increases the tendency to engage in elaborate and systematic evaluation (Kruglanski and Webster 1996, De Dreu and Carnevale 2003). We therefore hypothesized that, while controlling for attention (Schilke 2018),[6] an active evaluative mode manipulated by increasing evaluators' epistemic motivation would be associated with higher deliberation times.

Study Design

Participants were told that it was their task to evaluate a semifictive protest website, and, after closing it, to come up with suggestions to improve the design that would convince as many people as possible to take part. Following previous research (Scholten et al. 2007, Van der Schalk et al. 2010), we manipulated the epistemic motivation by varying the extent to which participants expected to be held accountable for their evaluation process (see Online Appendix B.1). All participants were shown the vignette from our study 1 with high attractiveness and high identifiability. After closing the questionnaire, participants received a debriefing.

In study 2, we used a one-factor between-subjects online experiment with a manipulation of epistemic motivation (low versus high) as independent variable, and participants' deliberation time as dependent variable. We conducted an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) *F*-test power analysis in G*Power (v3.1.9.4) with a medium effect size of 0.25 and two covariates (control variable and manipulation). To achieve 95% power, a minimum sample size of 251 respondents was needed ($\alpha = 0.05$). Consequently, we recruited 398 participants (U.S. citizens, 53.8% women, average age 37.8 years) via the online survey panel Prolific. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions.

Measures

Dependent Variable. Deliberation time was measured with Qualtrics survey software as the time respondents spent on the protest website: from entering the website to closing the protest website.

Independent Variable. As a manipulation check, participants filled in an open text field to elaborate on how they thought the protest website could be improved. We used the number of characters they filled in via the open field as a manipulation check. This manipulation check is actual behavior and thus avoids a possible social desirability bias of self-reported measures. Participants in the low epistemic motivation condition group typed on average 267 characters in the open field, whereas participants in the high epistemic motivation condition group typed 329 characters. The analysis of variance demonstrated a significant difference in actual deliberation between the conditions ($F(1, 396) = 5.28$, $p < 0.05$).

Control Variable. Because deliberation time may also reflect participants' attention to an experimental task (Schilke 2018), we included six questions ($\alpha = 0.85$) on any influence on their concentration from various sources of distraction during the experiment, based on Banbury and Berry (2005).

Results

The ANCOVA revealed that, when controlling for attention ($F(1, 395) = 4.92$, $p < 0.05$), participants in the high epistemic motivation condition group took more time to evaluate the protest website than those in the low epistemic group ($F(1, 395) = 4.82$, $p < 0.05$). These results provide evidence for the suitability of deliberation time as a measure for the evaluative mode. Results show that evaluators who are motivated to actively concentrate on the information presented take significantly longer to process that information than people passively scanning the information and applying heuristics to make their judgments. As such, we may conclude that evaluators taking a long time to deliberate did so because they were applying more deliberative System 2 thinking.

Study 3

In study 1, we found a negative effect of endorsers' identifiability for evaluators in passive mode compared with evaluators in active mode. This surprising effect for evaluators in passive mode could result from an unobserved confounding variable that obstructs causality of the source identifiability treatment in study 1. Particularly, endorsers' identifiability on study 1's protest website may increase evaluators' expectation that their own personal information will be visible and potentially misused when they would participate (Dinev and Hart 2004, Martin 2016). They may fear the social disapproval of other evaluators after making their potentially deviant legitimacy judgment public (Liu and Fahmy 2011, Bitektine and Haack 2015). Privacy concerns and fear of social disapproval may inhibit evaluators in passive mode from expressing their legitimacy judgments more than evaluators in active mode, because we know from previous studies that their brief deliberation may make them less sure about their judgment (Maule et al. 2000, Kiani et al. 2014). This effect could be strong enough to suppress the mediation by endorsers' trustworthiness between endorsers' identifiability and evaluators' intention to express their legitimacy judgment. Hence, we test the competing mediation effects of trustworthiness, privacy concerns, and fear of social disapproval.

Study Design

We used a one-factor between-subjects online experiment with a manipulation of peer endorsers' identifiability (low versus high) as the independent variable, endorsers' trustworthiness, privacy concerns and fear of social disapproval as competing mediators, and intention to express a legitimacy judgment as dependent variable. We tested a multiple mediation model with the SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes 2017). We conducted power analysis in G*Power (v3.1.9.4) with a medium effect size of 0.15 and three covariates (manipulation, mediators, and control variable). To achieve 95% power, a minimum sample size of 129 respondents was needed ($\alpha = 0.05$). Consequently, we recruited 200 Dutch participants (44% women, average age was 35.3 years) via the online survey panel Prolific.[7]

Similar to study 2, participants were told that it was their task to evaluate a semifictive protest website, close it, and come up with suggestions to improve the design so that it would convince as many people as possible to take part. We used the same manipulation and measure for deliberation time as in study 2. The deliberation time (mean = 108.79, standard deviation = 72.83)

was similar to the deliberation time of evaluators in passive mode in study 2. This confirms that the evaluators were in passive mode. Participants were shown the vignette of study 1 with high endorsement attractiveness and a manipulation of endorsers' identifiability. Similar to study 1, this was a working protest website on which participants could browse. The website included a button to close the window when they finished their evaluation, afterwards they continued to the questionnaire, followed by a debriefing session.

Measures

Dependent Variable. Intention to express a legitimacy judgment was measured in the same way as in study 1 (six items on five-point Likert scale, $\alpha = 0.90$).

Independent Variable. We used the perception of source identifiability scale of Rains (2007) (four items on five-point Likert scale, $\alpha = 0.91$) as a manipulation check of peer endorser identifiability manipulated on the protest website. An ANOVA demonstrated an intended significant difference of perceived endorser identifiability between the conditions ($F(1, 192) = 176.87$, $p = 0.000$), confirming the effectiveness of the manipulation.

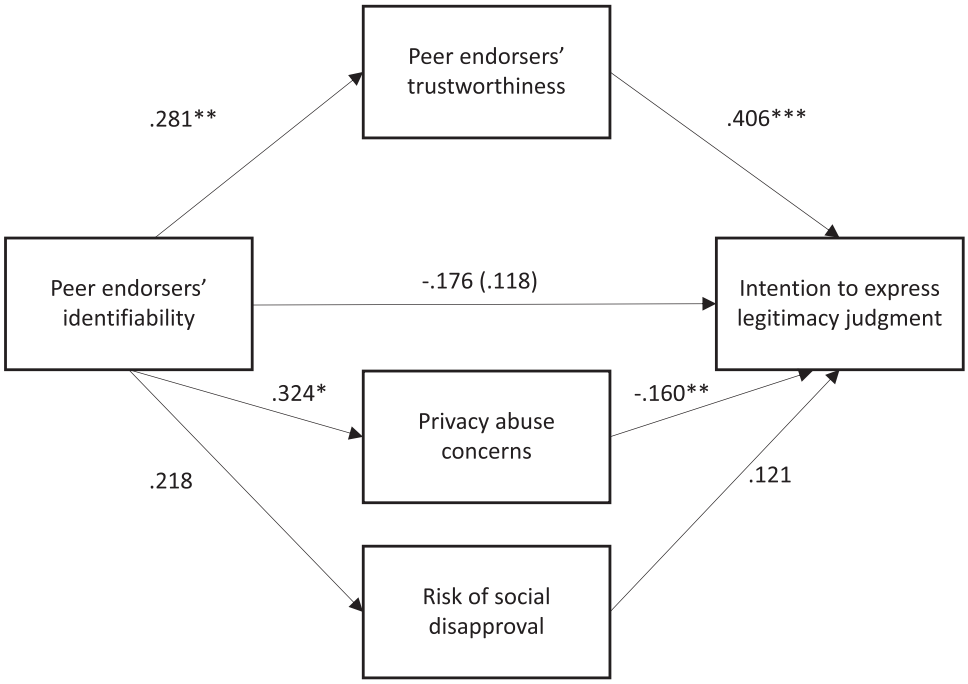
Mediators.[8] We measured endorsers' trustworthiness with Ohanian's (1990) source trustworthiness scale (six items on five-point Likert scale, $\alpha = 0.88$). We then compared this mediation effect against two competing effects. First, we measured perceived concerns of privacy abuse with the scale of Dinev and Hart (2004) (three items on five-point Likert scale, $\alpha = 0.87$), which measures participants' perception of the risk that private information on the protest website might be misused by others. Second, we measured fear of social risk with public self-awareness scale based on Prentice-Dunn and Rogers (1982) (three items on five-point Likert scale, $\alpha = 0.72$), which measures participants' perception that their opinion will be scrutinized and open to criticism by others.

Control Variable. Because judgment may also reflect participants' attention to an experimental task (Schilke 2018), we included six items ($\alpha = 0.92$) about any influence on their concentration from various sources of distraction during the experiment, based on Banbury and Berry (2005).

Results

While controlling for attention ($B = 0.065$, $p = 0.5328$), the multiple mediation analysis (Figure 2) revealed a significant positive indirect effect ($B = 0.114$, confidence interval (CI): 0.037, 0.212) of endorser identifiability on intention to express a legitimacy judgment through source trustworthiness. In addition, the analysis also revealed a significant negative indirect effect ($B = -0.052$, CI: −0.140, −0.001) by privacy concerns.

Figure 2. Results Multiple Mediation Analysis Study 3



There was, however, no significant indirect effect by fear of social disapproval. In line with study 1, we found an insignificant negative direct effect ($B = -0.176$, $p = 0.1362$). Hence, we conclude that the influence of peer endorsers' identifiability on intention to express a legitimacy judgment is fully mediated through source trustworthiness and through privacy abuse concerns.

Study 4

A major advantage of the vignette approach in study 1 is that it allowed us to explore the boundary conditions relating to the step from propriety evaluations to the public expression of judgments. However, the risk of low ecological validity is inherent in experiments with self-reported measures, particularly for studies related to moral judgment and behavior (Bostyn et al. 2018). The recent norm in experimental economics and in psychological experiments is to test the ecological validity of experimental findings (Baumeister et al. 2007). Hence, we carried out a longitudinal field study that examined the extent to which participants' intentions in an experiment matched their real-world behavior at a later date.

Study Design

We used a within-subjects longitudinal study with a self-report measure of intention to express a judgment as independent variable, and a behavioral measure of judgment expression after two weeks among the same participants as dependent variable. We conducted a linear regression *F*-test power analysis in G*Power (v3.1.9.4) with a medium effect size of 0.15. To achieve 95% power, a minimum sample size of 89 respondents was needed ($\alpha = 0.05$). However, the risk of missing data is higher with repeated measures among the same participants. Hence, we recruited 229 respondents via the online survey panel Prolific to participate in our longitudinal study. In the end, 196 U.S. citizens (55.1% women, average age 38.8 years) participated in both parts of the study.

In the first part of this study, the procedure was similar to study 2. However, there was no manipulation of the evaluative mode with varying instructions. Participants were asked to evaluate five protest websites, each time to indicate their intention to express their judgment, in a similar way as in our study 1, and to fill out an evaluation form where they could list suggestions to improve the protest websites. In the second part of this validation study, we collaborated with a large online petition platform to place a real online petition with the same protest topic as one of the fictive campaigns in the first part of this validation study, modelled after typical online petitions. After two weeks, the same participants as in part one were asked to visit the campaign website on the real-world protest platform and decided whether to sign the petition using their name and email address. The link to the petition was embedded as a side note ("help us by supporting this real petition") in an invitation for a general survey about their personal life. Participants were free to click on the link, or to proceed with a social desirability survey. The online petition platform kept track of the IP addresses and the moment of entering the petition website of those participants who visited the petition website (153 participants). Afterward, participants received a debriefing explaining that the petition was only created for the experiment, and links were presented to real similar petitions. Study 4's materials and strategies to minimize consistency biases are included in Online Appendix D.

Measures

Dependent Variable. The dependent variable actual publicly visible expression of legitimacy judgment, in the second step, was measured as a dichotomous variable of signing or not signing the online petition via the petition platform. Out of 196 participants, 21 participants actually signed the real petition.

Independent and Control Variables. The independent variable intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments was measured in the first part of this validation study and was measured in the same way as in our study 1 (seven items, $\alpha = 0.94$). The average intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments for our mining scenario was 3.69 of 5, with a clear normal distribution. We measured social desirability with the original Personal Reaction Inventory of Crowne and Marlowe (1960) (33 items, true or false).

Results

We conducted a logistic regression analysis to test whether the intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments in the experimental setting predicted actual behavior in the real-world setting. The logistic regression results show that a one-point increase in intention, increases the odds of signing the petition by 3.66 ($p < 0.01$), while controlling for social desirability. This result provides evidence for the ecological validity of the dependent variable used in our study 1, namely self-reported intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments in a fictional protest as part of a vignette experiment partially predicts observable real-world behavior in a field study setting.

Discussion

In three vignette experiments and one field study, we examine how evaluators' intention to publicly express their legitimacy judgment depends on the peer endorsement

cues presented to them, and on their mental effort expended on processing the relevant information. The experiments used the exemplar setting of an online petition that asked consumers to publicly criticize an accommodation booking platform accused of profiting from slave-like labor conditions.

Theoretical Implications

Our results reveal that peer endorsement cues influence decisions made by evaluators in the passive evaluative mode to publicly express their legitimacy judgments, whereas evaluators in the active mode are unaffected by this peer endorsement information. Our findings extend Bitektine and Haack's (2015) model on how sources of validity influence legitimacy judgment formation and expression. Specifically, we find a direct effect of the visual attractiveness of the endorsement on passive evaluators' public expression, but no mediation of this effect by the evaluator's own propriety evaluations, which indicates that this social information pertaining to peers is less important for evaluators' intrapersonal judgment formation, and more important for their decision to make a private judgment public. Endorsement attractiveness cues transmit rich social information and boost the social proof mechanism (Pornpitakpan 2004), signaling social acceptability and quality, and allowing the intuitive and reflexive System 1 heuristic processing to quickly reach a judgment on publicly expressing a judgment about the appropriateness of the target organization's behavior. This finding extends recent social evaluation theory, such as Etter et al.'s (2019) model of social evaluation in the domain of social media. It demonstrates that individual evaluators perceive an endorsement's attractiveness as a reflection of its value and credibility, serving as a heuristic to decide to publicly express their judgment. Societal actors increasingly use social media and the multimodal opportunities they offer, compelling researchers to look beyond simple textual information to fully account for the role that the rich bandwidth of social information transmitted via social media plays in the social construction of meaning (Etter et al. 2019).

We find a more nuanced effect of the identifiability of the endorser on public expression by evaluators in the passive mode, with two competing effects each working in opposite directions. On the one hand, endorser identifiability increases evaluators' intention to publicly express their judgment because it increases their perception of the endorsers' trustworthiness and helps them to feel more confident that they have made the right decision. This is in line with theory predicting that personal information that is publicly visible will strengthen endorsers' credibility (Rains 2007, Berger 2014, Jin 2018). On the other hand, endorsers' identifiability inhibits evaluators in the passive mode from expressing their legitimacy judgment because of their concerns that by doing so they themselves would become identifiable, and their personal information may be misused. Literature on social evaluation posits the possibility of judgment suppression (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Clemente and Roulet 2015), and our empirical findings add evidence that this effect of privacy concerns does play a role, to a large extent cancelling out the positive effect of identifiability as a cue of trustworthiness. These competing effects require further exploration, and we assessed the effect of two possible explanations as to why identifiability has the effect of suppressing judgment expression. One explanation is that when the act of public expression requires disclosure of one's personal details the evaluator may fear that this information may be misused (Zorina et al. 2021). An alternative explanation, based on the notion of signaling conformance to norms as a means to gain social approval (Centola 2011), is that evaluators in the passive evaluative mode could feel uncertain about their judgment and are likely to feel vulnerable to criticism by those who have taken more time to consider the issues thoroughly. Information increasing peers' identifiability will strengthen evaluators' intentions to publicly express their legitimacy judgments when it maximizes perceptions of trustworthiness and minimizes privacy concerns, and we speculate that this may be possible when the information highlights details of the endorsers that are not easily used to trace them in the offline world, such as first names and photos as opposed to last names and addresses.

These findings add to our current understanding of how those in the active and passive evaluative modes are affected differently by the horizontal legitimacy validation through peer endorsements rather than through hierarchical authoritative validation (Clemente and Roulet 2015, Haack et al. 2021). Theory covering influences on individual evaluations has traditionally assumed an important role for collective validation institutions (Bitektine and Haack 2015), and little attention has been paid to the influence of similar others (Johnson et al. 2006), particularly other individuals not known to the evaluator and without any authority. However, because of an increased use of social media, horizontal influences are increasingly having an impact on the social evaluation of organizations (Etter et al. 2019, Wang et al. 2021). Our findings show that endorsements from other social media users play a role, as they influence the decisions of evaluators in the passive mode, but not in the active mode. This influence on publicly expressing judgments, in turn, could act as new peer endorsement cues for other evaluators. As a consequence of the high number of social connections between social media users, this process can accelerate the accumulation of public expressions of disapproval of an organization leading to a cascade of delegitimization judgments (Haack et al.

2021, Wang et al. 2021). Given the power of this reinforcement, we propose to extend legitimacy models to include this mutual horizontal peer-endorsement-as-validation influence on evaluators in the passive mode.

Legitimacy scholars have theorized on the heterogeneity of evaluators' motivations to express their judgment (Etter et al. 2019, Haack et al. 2021), as well as different evaluators' information processing modes (Tost 2011, Haack et al. 2014, Bitektine and Haack 2015). Our empirical findings on the influence of evaluators' propriety evaluations on their intention to publicly express legitimacy judgments show that this influence differs for evaluators in the passive and the active modes. Evaluators in the active mode are more strongly motivated to publicly express their judgment in cases where their cognitive motivations are stronger, where their instrumental and moral reasoning is salient, after a considered deliberation of the information at hand. In terms of instrumentality, our findings are in line with the notion of evaluators as rational agents who consider their own interests and preferences related to the legitimacy object (Klandermans 2013) and who base their intention to publicly express their legitimacy judgment on an assessment of the possible effect on their own personal circumstances. We extend current theory by showing that such instrumental considerations influence the active, but not the passive evaluators' intention to express their judgment. Regarding moral evaluations, our findings show the strong effect of a reasoned assessment of evaluators' corresponding moral or ethical values. This is in line with cognitive developmental theory of moral evaluation that works through a purposeful, rule-based process, where the intention is to act in accordance with internal moral values (Weaver et al. 2014). We show that this effect is stronger for active than for passive evaluators. We interpret this to mean that the active evaluators, whose internal moral evaluation leads them to disapprove of an organization's behavior, are driven to take the next step of publicly expressing their judgment as a means of contributing to the call for change. Their desire to send a public signal that change is necessary is driven, to a large extent, by their moral condemnation, which itself requires deliberation. Interestingly, this picture is somewhat more nuanced, as we find that evaluators in the passive mode were also motivated to publicly express their judgments based on their moral evaluations, although to a lesser extent than the active evaluators were. Following recent developments on understanding moral cognition, we postulate that a second, less rule-based, process of moral intuition is at work (Weaver et al. 2014, Bundy and Pfarrer 2015) and that the intuitive and reflexive System 1–type moral judgment takes place when evaluators are faced with legitimacy-related information that conflicts with their moral norms. In such situations, we propose that passive evaluators will use moral intuition as a motivation for publicly expressing their disapproval, whereas active evaluators build on their initial moral intuition by following a deliberative, System 2–type process. Further empirical testing of these two moral evaluation paths to public expression is required.

With respect to evaluators in the passive mode, our findings show that these evaluators are more motivated to express their judgment if they can strongly relate to the purported victims of contested organizational behavior or strategy, whereas evaluators in the active mode are not. Such feelings of relatedness seem to occur instantaneously, without the need for deep deliberation (Kahneman 2011). This provides new empirical evidence of individual motivations based on the socially extended self (Neville and Reicher 2011).

Taken together, the findings described above reinforce propositions by legitimacy scholars that peer endorsement influences legitimacy judgment expression (Walker et al. 1986, Johnson 2004, Haack et al. 2021), and that evaluators in the active and passive modes approach their evaluations differently (Tost 2011, Haack et al. 2014, Bitektine and Haack 2015). We augment these propositions by showing when and how they extend to the public expression of judgments.

Implications for Theories of Institutional Change

Our findings contribute new integrative insights to the ongoing debate between institutional scholars regarding the role of individuals' legitimacy judgments in the wider context of institutional change (Tost 2011, Haack et al. 2014, Bitektine and Haack 2015). We show how peer endorsement influences the public expression of legitimacy judgments, how evaluators in the active and passive modes differ, and we uncover boundary conditions that determine when intrapersonal propriety evaluations lead to judgment expression. The aggregation of these expressions could influence collective validation and contribute to whether and how organizations and eventually institutions change (Bitektine and Haack 2015, Suddaby et al. 2017, Haack et al. 2021). Policy makers, targeted organizations, and change agents need to be aware that legitimacy information, including peer endorsements, reach different audiences, in our case those in active evaluative mode willing to expend significant time and effort and those in passive mode who are not, and that those in each state react differently to the information and cues they perceive.

Recently, Haack et al. (2021) theorized that institutional change may be instigated at the micro level of individual propriety evaluations, rather than only through calls for change from collective validation institutions. Individuals who voice a concern with respect to a legitimacy object, such as an organization, may trigger a microlevel cascade leading to the formation of a new consensus

that change is required. In the present study, we contribute to this theory as we explore when such a cascade may come about, namely through the interaction of evaluators' perceptions of peer endorsements with their own evaluative mode, and this finding has consequences for theories of change. Many scholars argue that evaluators that are more committed to a legitimacy cause and that expend substantive effort in engaging with a community of like-minded activists form the main pathway through which microlevel action influences change (Kristofferson et al. 2014). Our findings, however, suggest that also those individuals that are less committed and less ready to expend energy are, nevertheless, concerned and prepared to voice their concerns for change. Often, a publicly expressed judgment, such as signing an online petition, may be seen and acted on by other evaluators, whereby it is unknown to them whether the endorsers took time to deliberate or not. This means that significant institutional change may come about when sufficient numbers of dissenting opinions are shared, even when many evaluators base their decisions to publicly express their judgments on heuristics and cognitive shortcuts. Indeed, for any legitimacy-related topic of controversy, we may expect a minority of individuals to be in a position that they are able and willing to expend significant time and effort on fighting for the cause, and, given the constant stream of claims on our attention, most individuals to be in a position where they are unable to exert significant effort. If this is the case, then our findings suggest that the conditions under which those in the passive evaluative mode are exposed to calls for change is of crucial importance, when delegitimation comes about through a cascade of individual legitimacy judgments as opposed to the top-down imposition from collective validation institutions.

Additionally, in recent years we have witnessed frequently heated and acrimonious exchanges between change agents (e.g., protest organizations) and the organizations they target related to societal challenges, such as climate change and social inequality. In these exchanges, public opinion plays a key role (Clemente and Roulet 2015), and the collective view of which way public opinion is leaning is strongly influenced by mutual influence between individuals who publicly express their legitimacy judgments. As such, change agents that endeavor to stimulate a grassroots following as a signal to stakeholders that public opinion is shifting need to be aware of the boundary conditions of peer endorsements. For example, how the design of their tactical repertoire may be optimized to encourage a "spiral of empowerment" among their public audience (Lee and Chun 2016, Haack et al. 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

Our experimental approach was not embedded in the evaluators' everyday social environment. Future research could adopt a social network perspective and study how relational characteristics influence the expression of legitimacy judgments, such as the equivalence and strength of social ties between endorser and evaluator, the number and nature of peer endorsements required for evaluators to decide on taking action, or the structural aspects of endorsers' and evaluators' social networks.

Also, this study did not incorporate the influence of prior legitimacy judgments on legitimacy judgment formation and expression, but such prior judgments could affect subsequent legitimacy judgments (Tost 2011). We designed a fictive scenario to minimize the likelihood of prior judgments, but there still may be prior judgments of the industry category to which the fictive organization belongs. Although random assignment of respondents to conditions can alleviate such concerns, such prior beliefs about an industry may still interact with evaluative mode. Therefore, we suggest that future experiments take evaluators' prior legitimacy judgments into account.

Our findings failed to uncover a mediating effect of propriety evaluations on the effects of peer endorsement on publicly visible judgment expression. An explanation for this is that social information of peer endorsements does not influence evaluators' intrapersonal propriety evaluations but rather that it signals social proof to the passive evaluators that the peer endorsement is reasonably valid. As we studied the boundary conditions of peer endorsement, this study is no proof that the effect of peer endorsement on propriety evaluations does not exist, and future research is needed to replicate or refute these findings. A constructive replication of our model could be achieved by following the mediation-by-process approach, using a series of experiments demonstrating the proposed causal chain of mediation (Spencer et al. 2005).

Finally, an assumption in our reasoning of the importance of microlevel exploration is that a cascade of public expressions will have an effect at the macro level, influencing collective validation and playing a role in bringing about change to organizations (Haack et al. 2021). Our theorizing on evaluators' public expression of legitimacy judgments is of more value if it can be empirically shown that there is cross-level influence from the micro to the macro level, as part of the complex interplay between evaluators, protest organizers, peer endorsers, validation institutions, as well as the targeted organizations. Carefully designed longitudinal and multilevel research is needed to show how, and through which pathways, this interplay influences organizational behavior and strategy.

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Endnotes

[1] The studies' data, syntax and other supplementary materials are available on this Open Science Foundation repository: https://osf.io/wyjxg/.

[2] Initially, we planned to have interactivity as third condition. However, this condition lacked construct validity as it was highly confounded with the protest website's ease of use.

[3] We conducted a post hoc linear regression *F*-test power analysis in G*Power (v3.1.9.4) with eight predictor variables, a medium effect size of 0.15, and a sample size of 154 respondents. Our main experiment achieves a power of 94.1%.

[4] Our data set contained 3.1% missing values. The main reasons for these missing values were that some respondents skipped questions or did not complete the questionnaire. We removed all respondents with more than 15% missing values and used regression-based multiple imputation (20 runs) to replace the remaining missing data (Hair et al. 2018).

[5] We excluded the demographic control variables gender and education level from the regression analysis since they were insignificant and would only reduce statistical power. Also, we excluded the mediator affective evaluation since it strongly overlapped, both statistically and theoretically, with moral evaluation.

[6] As it is important to maintain operational consistency and construct clarity in future papers that measure the evaluative mode, we stress the need to account for both deliberation and attention when investigating intrapersonal evaluation.

[7] We removed six participants from the data set because they were not able to visit the protest website. Participants were randomly assigned and received a small compensation for their participation.

[8] We excluded the mediator accountability because of a lack of reliability ($\alpha = 0.32$).

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