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Public-private partnerships: How institutional linkages help to build organizational legitimacy in an international environment

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ABSTRACT

Gaining legitimacy in their host country environment is a key priority for multinational corporations' public relations efforts since it secures their local social license to operate. By applying neo-institutional public relations to corporate diplomacy, this paper argued that institutional linkages between corporations and local government could enhance the building of legitimacy. The study sought to determine whether institutional relations affect the perception of organizational legitimacy, focusing on the United Arab Emirates. In non-democratic countries, public relations tends to be perceived as less sophisticated, and legitimacy becomes even more critical for foreign corporations. Therefore, a one-factorial (corporate diplomacy with/ without governmental involvement) between-subjects experimental design study surveying a representative sample of residents in the United Arab Emirates ($N = 199$) was conducted. The results imply that corporate diplomacy with governmental linkages leads to a higher perception of moral, pragmatic, and regulative organizational legitimacy, partially mediated by media credibility, governmental legitimacy, and issue legitimacy.

1. Introduction

Gaining organizational legitimacy is a significant challenge for public relations (PR) efforts of multinational corporations (MNCs) in their host country environment (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014; Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009). One valid approach, building on public relations (PR) to proactively respond to this challenge and to gain organizational legitimacy, is corporate diplomacy (CD) (Mogensen, 2017), which is generally conceived as corporate engagement in societal, environmental, and political issues in a company's host countries (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019). Organizational legitimacy is an evaluative judgment of a group concerning the appropriateness, properness, and desirability of organizational behavior (Suchman, 1995) and determines a corporation's social acceptance and its social license to operate (Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009; Rindova et al., 2006). Due to the so-called "liability of foreignness," foreign MNCs are observed more critically by their host country environment, which may result in delays of legitimacy perceptions (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Therefore, engagement in legitimacy-seeking activities such as CD becomes particularly crucial for MNCs (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006).

Applying neo-institutionalism to PR, the perception of

organizational legitimacy depends on the extent to which an organization successfully communicates that it acts appropriately, meeting societal expectations created by its environment (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Sandhu, 2009; Suchman, 1995). Following this, we argue that CD communication can help MNCs be perceived as acting appropriately and adequately on different levels (moral, pragmatic, and regulative), which can positively influence organizational legitimacy. Due to its high validity in legitimacy judgments, the mass media function as a major evaluator of organizations, affecting the organizational environment to a great extent (Barron, 1998; Deephouse, 1996; Vergne, 2011) and, therefore, significantly influencing legitimacy perceptions of MNCs in the host country society. Moreover, the process of gaining organizational legitimacy can be particularly affected by the presence of institutional linkages, conceived as the connections and ties of an organization to established institutional actors such as the government (Baum & Mezas, 1993; Baum & Oliver, 1991).

While scholars have emphasized the role of CD (Mogensen, 2017, 2019; Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009) and institutional ties between MNCs and the host country government for gaining legitimacy (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999), empirical research examining the impact on organizational legitimacy of CD with governmental

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involvement does not, to the best of our knowledge, exist so far. Thus, this paper seeks to explore the effects of CD by conducting an experimental design study with one factor (CD without/with governmental linkage) surveying a representative sample of residents ($N = 199$) living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for at least five years. The country was chosen firstly because, in emerging countries such as the UAE, MNCs from developed economies are often expected to take a societal role for the local community because of their financial power and expertise (Child & Tsai, 2005). This points to the role of CD. Secondly, the UAE is among the fastest-growing business regions worldwide, meaning you can find most international MNCs in the country (Anadol et al., 2015). Thirdly, the local government encourages private sector involvement in societal issues since this is to a great extent necessary to achieve the national goals of the UAE (Sabouni, 2017), for instance, a world-class education and healthcare system (National Agenda, 2020). Lastly, due to the government's significant institutional power in the UAE, collaborations between MNCs and governmental institutions are inevitable since they provide MNCs with access to the community and further resources necessary for corporate engagement in societal issues (White & Alkandari, 2019).

Analyzing the effects of media coverage of CD with governmental participation helps explain the role of institutional relations in global PR for gaining legitimacy while providing practical insights into how MNCs may take an active role in being perceived as socially accepted and simultaneously truly contributing to societal issues in the host country. In this way, the current study extends previous research on CD and legitimacy (Mogensen, 2017; Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009) and contributes to the lacking PR research in non-Western countries, particularly the Middle East (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

2. Conceptual framework and state of research

2.1. Neo-institutionalism, public relations, and the striving for legitimacy

Organizational legitimacy is a central construct in neo-institutionalism (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995) and is regarded as a significant concern of PR practices (Boyd, 2000; Edwards, 2006; Holmström, 2005). As Metzler (2000) has emphasized, organizational legitimacy is "at the core of most, if not all, public relations activities" (p. 321). It is widely accepted among scholars that PR is understood as communication between an organization and its environment (Merkelsen, 2013; Vasquez & Taylor, 2000) to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships (Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Organizational legitimacy is significantly linked to cultivating mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its legitimacy evaluators (Hudson, 2001; Wiggill, 2014). In this way, research has regarded legitimacy as a relational concept (Ledingham, 2003) or as a vital facet of relationships between an organization and its environment (Lock, 2019). For these reasons, studying PR within neo-institutionalism is of high value since it considers the relationship between an organization and its social environment as most relevant in explaining organizational behavior and gaining organizational legitimacy (see Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). Yet, research applying neo-institutional approaches and legitimacy concepts to PR has only recently occurred (Merkelsen, 2013; Sandhu, 2009).

Neo-institutionalism points to the embeddedness of an organization within its environment, the organizational field (Friedland & Alford, 1991). The organizational field includes regulatory institutions, social actors, and competitors, constituting the "recognized area of institutional life" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Institutional logics guide organizational activities and issues within an organizational field as these logics serve as an orientation for organizations and their actions and structures (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Scott, 2001). Thus, institutional logics also shape MNCs' activities such as CD – they reflect assumptions concerning societal demands that emerge from socially constructed norms and values (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 2008). In

other words, whatever corporations do, they do in response to their environment to meet the societal demands and values – because this allows organizations to be perceived as legitimate. As an organization's survival depends heavily on organizational legitimacy (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999), it seeks to proactively demonstrate its congruence with societal expectations arising from its environment (such as the host country) (Deephouse et al., 2017). Increasingly, scholars have emphasized the active role of organizations in the legitimation process, referring to institutional work (Lawrence, 1999; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Building on that, PR efforts are central to successfully expressing the consistency between an organization's activities and the societal demands within the organizational environment to gain organizational legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Sandhu, 2009).

Organizational legitimacy is defined in several, often varying, ways (Bitektine, 2011). Generally, the construct is conceived as a perception regarding how appropriately, desirably, and properly an organization acts (Suchman, 1995). This evaluation builds on socially constructed values and norms and determines the overall societal approval of an organization (Deephouse, 1996; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Suchman, 1995). In this regard, Rindova et al. (2006) have defined the legitimacy of a company as "[t]he degree to which broader publics view a company's activities as socially acceptable and desirable because its practices comply with industry norms and broader societal expectations" (p. 55). Others have regarded organizational legitimacy as a behavioral consequence (Deephouse, 1996; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999), defining the term as "[t]he endorsement of an organization by social actors" (Deephouse, 1996, p. 1025). The issue of organizational legitimacy is particularly relevant to MNCs because they often face a "liability of foreignness" (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999), related to a lack of information on foreign corporations in the host country, which may result in stereotypes and different standards being used to judge the MNCs' value for the society and their legitimacy compared to domestic firms. Due to comparatively high levels of scrutiny and a continuous suspicion of foreign MNCs in a host country, legitimacy-seeking efforts are essential to secure an MNC's social acceptance and survival in the long term (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Moreover, one of the most relevant evaluators in an organization's environment is the mass media (Bitektine, 2011) because they are considered a key influencer of public opinion, particularly regarding organizations (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Mass media contribute to organizational legitimacy on different levels by making organizations visible and judging them (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, we argue that studying the effects of CD makes the most sense when analyzing CD communication in the news media.

Organizational legitimacy emerges on different levels: cognitive, moral, pragmatic, and regulative (Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995). Cognitive legitimacy refers to the taken-for-grantedness and comprehensibility of an organization (Suchman, 1995). As it builds on the categorization of an organization in a pre-existing positive evaluated classification (Bitektine, 2011), cognitive legitimacy is hard to address through PR efforts and will not be regarded further here. Instead, this paper will focus on the socio-political legitimacy levels, consisting of moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy. Moral legitimacy is based on normative approval by the evaluators of an organization (Barron, 1998; Suchman, 1995). It can be gained by demonstrating an organization's efforts as going beyond individual interests, meeting societal expectations, and being beneficial for the evaluator's social surroundings or the society at large (Barron, 1998; Rindova et al., 2006; Suchman, 1995). In contrast, pragmatic legitimacy rests on the individual evaluator's self-interest and the degree to which organizational actions provide the evaluator with favorable exchanges (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Barron, 1998; Bitektine, 2011; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Suchman, 1995). Lastly, regulative legitimacy derives from an organization's ability to demonstrate compliance with regulations, standards, and expectations from governmental institutions (Chung et al., 2016; Diez-Martin et al., 2019; Scott, 2001). Building on the literature, we adapt and extend Bitektine's (2011) enumerative definition of legitimacy by

adding regulative legitimacy. For the current study, we define organizational legitimacy as the perception of an organization and its activities in the host country based on the evaluation of the overall value of the organization and its activities to individuals (pragmatic legitimacy), the local community (moral legitimacy), and the government in the host country (regulative legitimacy).

Previous empirical studies have explored the construction of organizational legitimacy in the mass media employing content and discourse analysis (Deephouse, 1996; Patel & Xavier, 2005; Rodríguez Pérez, 2017; Vaara, 2014; Vergne, 2011). Others have examined the rhetorical legitimation strategies of companies (Castelló & Lozano, 2011), concluding that corporate discourse mainly seeks to gain moral legitimacy. However, particularly in terms of studying the effects of organizational or media communication on legitimacy perceptions, research is scarce so far, despite some exceptions. Bachmann and Ingenhoff (2016, 2017) have examined the impact of CSR disclosure by conducting experimental design studies and found that the extent of CSR communication positively affects corporate legitimacy directly and indirectly with content credibility as a mediating variable (Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016). In the case of a media company, however, the authors have found the extent of CSR disclosure had only an indirect effect on corporate legitimacy (Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2017). Similarly, Colleoni (2013) has analyzed legitimacy in the context of CSR. Using network analysis on Twitter, the author has concluded that neither engaging nor informative corporate communication strategies seem to enable a company to demonstrate the congruence of corporate actions with societal expectations, which otherwise could have led to organizational legitimacy. Measuring organizational legitimacy through the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships, Wiggill (2014) has conducted interviews with a non-profit organization and its regulatory environment. The author has found that organizational legitimacy derives significantly from the high quality of relationships between an organization and its most immediate audience (Wiggill, 2014). Overall, however, PR research has not sufficiently addressed the effects of organizational legitimacy so far, and it is not clear to what extent PR efforts affect the different levels of organizational legitimacy.

2.2. Corporate diplomacy and the case of the UAE

The involvement of corporate actors in global issues has been increasingly discussed for more than two decades across several research fields, including general management, public diplomacy, international relations, and public relations (Melissen, 1999). However, the number of CD studies in the realm of PR research has increased particularly within the last five years, as has been shown by a recent systematic review of CD in leading academic journals across research fields (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019). Definitions and objectives of CD vary greatly and include organization-centered approaches, conceiving CD as a corporate relationship management tool that serves corporate reputation and social power in the international arena (Amann et al., 2007; Henisz, 2014; White et al., 2011), while others have conceptualized CD as corporate actor engagement in public diplomacy and highlight the role of MNCs in serving home country diplomatic goals (Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009; White, 2015; White & Fitzpatrick, 2018; White & Kolesnicov, 2015). In addition to these, society-centered approaches on CD point to the role of foreign MNCs in supporting host country societies by engaging in societal issues to solve problems (Halevy et al., 2020; Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019; Mogensen, 2017, 2019, 2020a; Murphy & Smolarski, 2018). According to this approach, MNCs demonstrate their social commitment by directly engaging and collaborating with the host country's environment, which contributes to their organizational legitimacy perceptions (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019; Kochhar, 2018; Mogensen, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). In this regard, Mogensen (2017) has conceived CD as "a relevant concept for activities which transnational corporations engage in when they perceive an opportunity or a problem in a host country and try to develop a sustainable solution in

collaboration with relevant stakeholders at all levels" (p. 608). Other scholars have emphasized the role of relationship management and strategic communication for CD (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019; Macnamara, 2012; White et al., 2011) and have defined CD as the "activities of multinational companies, which are directed at the host country's key stakeholders and aimed at participating in decision-making processes on relevant socio-political issues and building relationships to gain corporate legitimacy" (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019, p. 358). Critical stakeholders in the context of CD include host country governments and regulators, the local community, industry associations, and environmental interest groups in the host country (Kochhar, 2018; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). To generate legitimacy, CD needs to be reflected in a "proactive and evolving process which [...] looks into effectively and strategically engaging stakeholders [...] to enhance understanding and alignment between companies and their stakeholders" (Kochhar, 2018, pp. 349–350).

Ingenhoff and Marschlich's (2019) definition considered concepts of political CSR (see Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), reflected in the assumption that CD includes the involvement in societal issues in the host country. Likewise, other authors have linked CD and political CSR (Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2015; White, 2020; White et al., 2011). White (2020) has highlighted that CD is implemented through CSR, among other instruments. Through their engagement in social and political issues such as health, education, and security in the host country – activities that may be associated with CSR – MNCs are able to create positive diplomatic effects in the international arena (White, 2020). Ingenhoff and Marschlich (2019) have compared CD and political CSR concepts and concluded that while there is certainly an overlap, CD and political CSR differ in terms of their context and scope. CD, in contrast to political CSR, is viewed as international relationship management between MNCs and the host country public and thus takes place in a transnational context (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; Mogensen, 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, CD is associated with diplomatic affairs, i.e., by focusing on relationship management with the host country public, CD becomes a diplomatic tool, which may positively impact the home country's image (White, 2015). In contrast, political CSR and classical CSR concepts (see Schultz, Castello, & Morsing, 2013, for an overview) are "not commonly conceptualized as international per se or dependent on international relations," and "elements of negotiations of companies with institutional actors in a country [...] are often not highlighted in the CSR literature" (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021, p. 2).

In summary, engagement in societal issues and relationship building are essential elements of CD, allowing companies to gain legitimacy within the host country's society. Therefore, the current paper defines CD as a legitimation strategy of MNCs towards their host country environment, in which they engage in societal issues and, thereby, build relationships with the host country environment (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019; Kochhar, 2018; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; Mogensen, 2017). Building on the literature on CD and our conceptualization of legitimacy (see Section 2.1), we argue that the communication of CD positively influences the evaluation of the company as, firstly, being beneficial for the local society (moral legitimacy), secondly, contributing to personal interests (pragmatic legitimacy), and lastly, being congruent with expectations of governmental actors (regulative legitimacy).

While conceptual research on CD has increased significantly in recent years (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019; Mogensen, 2019; Molleda & Kochhar, 2014; White, 2015), empirical research is still rare, and "very little attention has been given to corporate diplomacy in public relations scholarship, despite the overlap in functions between corporate diplomacy and international public relations" (White, 2015, p. 306). Some exceptions are the studies by White and colleagues that have explored practitioners' perspectives on CD (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; White & Fitzpatrick, 2018), its link to CSR (White et al., 2011), and the value of CD for nation branding (White & Kolesnicov, 2015). First, their

results showed that MNCs are not very familiar with the term “corporate diplomacy” and rarely intentionally engage in CD to foster the host country image or contribute to other diplomatic goals of the home country; instead, MNCs aim to develop a supportive host country environment (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; White & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Second, the authors have found that CD efforts can influence foreign audiences and contribute to the nation branding efforts of the host country (White & Kolesnicov, 2015). Third, one study has indicated that CD is often performed alongside host country officials engaging in social causes, including environmental issues and human rights (White et al., 2011). In addition, Mogensen (2017) has explored corporate engagement in a Chinese hydropower project in Myanmar and concluded that CD might benefit both the company and the host country – as long as the MNCs directly engage with the host country public terming it corporate public diplomacy. Finally, a recent study has investigated MNCs’ perceptions of the role of CD in creating social capital, conceived as the sum of social resources developed through positive relationships (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). From a corporate perspective, social capital may result in gaining organizational legitimacy (see Hurst, Johnston, & Lane, 2020), implying that MNCs seek to gain legitimacy through CD (see Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). However, the concrete effects of CD on organizational legitimacy, particularly from the perspective of the host country society, have not yet been empirically analyzed.

MNCs are embedded in an institutional environment, whose social norms and values may differ from one (host) country to another (Suchman, 1995). Major factors determining PR in a multinational context and, in this way, affecting CD are the political system and the societal culture (Sriramesh & Verčić, 2002). The UAE is a federal elective constitutional monarchy consisting of seven emirates, each ruled by a Sheik (Katsioloudes & Brodtkorb, 2007). Due to the specific nature of the UAE’s political system, lacking democratic governmental institutions and an active public opinion to which all parts of the society can contribute, PR is “highly tied to government institutions” (Kirat, 2005, p. 325). The UAE government has made several commitments towards its community to improve social well-being within the last years, including an excellent healthcare system (UAE Government, 2018). However, the country depends on the engagement of the private sector to fulfill its societal commitments (Sabouni, 2017), which points to the high relevance of CD in contributing to the country’s societal expectations.

Concerning the societal culture, the UAE is an Islamic country, which increasingly seeks to integrate Western liberal values due to the high number of expatriates (Katsioloudes & Brodtkorb, 2007). In Islamic countries, it is highly appreciated that individual and collective actors, such as MNCs, demonstrate their social contribution and commitment to the existing social norms and values (Iqbal & Mirakhor, 2011). Thus, we assume that UAE citizens highly value CD as engagement in societal issues that may contribute to the local community. Moreover, the demonstration of the MNC’s alignment with social norms and values, which is the foundation for gaining moral legitimacy (see Deephouse & Suchman, 2008), is presumed to play a particular role in the UAE.

2.3. Gaining legitimacy: the effect of institutional linkages in the realm of PR

According to neo-institutional theory, a collaboration between a company and an institutional actor such as the government may increase organizational legitimacy (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995). An institutional linkage is conceived as “a direct and regularized relationship between an organization and an institution in the organization’s environment” (Baum & Oliver, 1991, p. 187). Following previous literature, in this paper, an institution is regarded as a significant constituent in an organization’s environment, which possesses substantial power across the community (Zucker, 1987), for instance, the host country government. The power of an institution arises from its social acceptance within the community or its legislative

authority (Turk, 1973; Zucker, 1987). One fundamental assumption of neo-institutionalism is that organizational legitimacy builds on the perception of organizational conformity to social norms and expectations within the organization’s environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1983). When an organization develops and demonstrates relationships with a well-established institution such as the government, it is more likely to be perceived as conforming to the social norms and expectations (Ma & Lu, 2017). In this way, the organization signals its “adherence to institutional prescriptions of appropriate conduct and [...] enhanc[es] [its] legitimacy” (Baum & Oliver, 1991, p. 189). Institutional ties between an organization and, for instance, the government lead to greater predictability and stability (DiMaggio, 1988), allowing the organization to access social and financial resources more easily (Peng et al., 2005). Following this, the organizational legitimacy (of the MNC) is the result of the association with an established institution that already possesses legitimacy (Galaskiewicz, 1985). The institutional linkage’s effect can be regarded as a legitimacy spillover (Kuilman & Li, 2009; Li et al., 2007).

While the construct has predominantly been discussed in organization studies, we aim to embed institutional linkages in PR research. According to previous scholars, relationship building is at the heart of PR (Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham, 2003). While neo-institutionalism has referred to the organizational field as the aggregate of all the relationships between an organization and its environment (Friedland & Alford, 1991), PR literature has regarded these as organization-public relationships (e.g., Ferguson, 1984). Others have conceptualized a relationship itself as the link between an organization and the most immediate groups in its environment (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). As Ferguson (1984) has noted, organization-public relationships can be operationalized as external linkages. Following this notion and the conceptualization of institutional linkages (Baum & Oliver, 1991), we argue that institutional linkages can be conceived as a specific form of organization-public relationships in which an organization is linked to an established legitimate institution in the organizational environment. This can, in turn, result in organizational legitimacy.

2.4. Institutional linkages with local government: public-private partnerships

Companies can build institutional linkages with various actors to better advance their interests and achieve positive outcomes. From a public relations perspective, scholars have examined corporate relationships mainly in the context of relationship management with employees (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2015, 2021) and the local community (e.g., Jahansoozi, 2007; Koya et al., 2021). A few studies have also investigated the relationship-building of corporations with governments and other public institutions (Chen, 2007; Luo, 2001; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021), other private companies (Fu & Li, 2019), and non-governmental institutions (Trapp, 2012). In the Middle East, MNCs often engage with governmental institutions due to the latter’s institutional power, and collaborations between the private and public sector are a common instrument of corporations for engaging in societal issues (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; White & Alkandari, 2019). Therefore, this study will focus on institutional linkages between MNCs and governments as reflected in public-private partnerships and investigate how the audience, i.e., citizens living in the UAE, perceive these collaborations in the case of CD.

Governments are among the most relevant strategic publics for corporations (Men et al., 2017), particularly for those operating globally, due to governments’ legal power and direct influence on corporate behavior in most countries (Chen, 2007). For this reason, creating and maintaining positive public-private partnerships is a central concern to corporations and can contribute to intangible and tangible outcomes, including corporate reputation (Chen, 2007), mutual trust and loyalty (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021), policy support (Fernandez & Underwood, 2009), as well as positive word-of-mouth and favorable media

coverage (Men et al., 2017). From the public's perspective, relationships with public institutions are special because the institutions' relationship management is evaluated according to the extent to which the outcomes of their relationships with other actors (such as companies) are perceived as meeting the public interest (Horsley et al., 2010) – which is equivalent to our understanding of moral legitimacy. In contrast, corporations are primarily associated with economic interests, which may lower the public's positive perception of non-business-related engagements, including CD initiatives. In this regard, public-private partnerships may be beneficial by helping shift the perception of an MNC from being self-interested to acting in the public interest.

So far, only a few studies have explored corporate relationships with governments and other public institutions. However, the ones that are available investigated the subject on the corporate level looking at how these relationships are cultivated, particularly by applying qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews (Chen, 2007; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; Men et al., 2017). Moreover, while the outcomes of relationships between organizations and the public in the context of the general public have already been comprehensively analyzed, the effects of public-private partnerships have, up to now, been insufficiently studied in PR research. Likewise, while scholarship suggests that CD initiatives help MNCs gain legitimacy (Mogensen, 2019; Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009), the effects of CD in general, and with governmental involvement in particular, on organizational legitimacy has not yet been comprehensively examined in empirical studies. For this reason, we raise the following research question:

RQ: To what extent and how do institutional linkages with governmental institutions influence the effect of CD on organizational legitimacy on a moral, pragmatic, and regulative level?

Previous studies have explored the value of institutional relations for organizational legitimacy, measured as institutional linkages (Baum & Mezas, 1993; Baum & Oliver, 1991), as group and community affiliations (Ma & Lu, 2017; Ruef, 2000), or as legitimacy spillovers and transfers (Dobrev et al., 2006; Kuilman & Li, 2009; Li et al., 2007; McKendrick et al., 2003). These studies have indicated that institutional linkages improve the likelihood of organizational survival (Baum & Oliver, 1991) and are positively related to organizational growth (Baum & Mezas, 1993). More precisely, Baum and Mezas (1993) have shown that institutional linkages between organizations and the government affect organizational growth more than community associations do. In line with this, Ma and Lu (2017) have found a significant moderating effect of group affiliations on the relationship between organizational traits and an organization's value in the context of emerging economies. Kuilman and Li (2009) have explored the effects of institutional linkages as "grades of membership." According to their study, organizational legitimacy can spill over from more recognized organizations to organizations with lower recognition and, therefore, a lower grade of membership. The authors have concluded that less well-known organizations could profit from being associated with more popular and more socially accepted organizations (Kuilman & Li, 2009). This is in line with other scholars who have analyzed the legitimization processes among organizations perceived as being part of one community (Li et al., 2007; Ruef, 2000). Accordingly, when an organization manages to position its identity as being related to an established identity in the community, it is more likely to gain legitimacy than if it is not associated with the established organization. This is explained by the assumption that an organization is evaluated first by its fit within existing cultural beliefs and typifications of an existing (organizational) community (Ruef, 2000). The higher the degree of the "identity overlap," the more likely the legitimacy spillover from one organization to another (Li et al., 2007), supporting the research on institutional linkages between an organization and the government. Building on this, we argue that CD initiatives that are performed in collaboration with the host country government will positively influence the corporation's legitimacy perception compared to CD without any institutional linkages, leading to the following hypothesis.

H1. *CD with institutional linkages to the host country government lead to a higher perception of organizational legitimacy on a moral, pragmatic, and regulative level.*

3. Intervening variables in the legitimization process

Previous literature has pointed to factors that may influence the effect of institutional linkages on organizational legitimacy, including the organization's size, age, and the competition among organizations (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Baum & Mezas, 1993; Li et al., 2007; Ruef, 2000), along with factors arising from the institutional context (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Accordingly, institutional linkages affect organizational legitimacy only when the established institution that an organization is linked to is perceived as acceptable and appropriate among a wider social group and, in this regard, as legitimate (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Therefore, the positive effect on organizational legitimacy of the institutional linkage with the host country government depends on the degree to which the government is perceived as a legitimate institution (Baum & Oliver, 1991). This leads to our second hypothesis.

H2. *Government legitimacy mediates the effect of CD on organizational legitimacy on a moral, pragmatic, and regulative level.*

In addition, scholars have suggested that organizational legitimacy depends on how the issue an organization engages in is perceived as proper and appropriate (Boyd, 2000; Chung et al., 2016; Coombs, 1992). While organizational legitimacy regards the perceptions of an organization as a whole, "issue legitimacy deals with legitimating a specific issue or an organizational behavior [...] [and] is critical to getting the public's support" (Chung et al., 2016, p. 406). As research has found, issues that are perceived as hard to solve or not suitable might negatively affect the perception of the organization that engages in this issue (Boyd, 2000; Coombs, 1992). For instance, Coombs (1992) has explored the role of issue legitimacy in the case of the Task Force of a former U.S. president on the issue of hunger. The author has concluded that, due to the lack of legitimacy of the hunger issue, the Task Force was not successful in gaining support on its policy propositions (Coombs, 1992). Thus, it is argued that the more the issue is perceived as legitimate, the more highly the organization is perceived as legitimate, resulting in the subsequent hypothesis.

H3. *Issue legitimacy mediates the effect of CD on organizational legitimacy on a moral, pragmatic, and regulative level.*

Moreover, since we explore the effect of CD in the news media as one of the most relevant evaluators when it comes to organizational legitimacy (Bitekine, 2011; Deephouse, 1996), the perception of this content source affects legitimacy judgments (see Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016; Finch et al., 2015). Accordingly, the extent to which news influences legitimacy evaluations of a corporation depends on how the evaluator believes what is written in the media, determining media credibility (Finch et al., 2015). In the context of the UAE, the issue of media credibility requires a distinct approach because the UAE media system is not considered free, i.e., the government has considerable influence on the media agenda (Geissner, 2015). The country's media laws stipulate strict sanctions if the media content is perceived as posing a threat to public order, often leading to self-censorship by journalists (Thomass, 2013). These conditions may negatively affect media credibility in the UAE and, in turn, the perception of CD and the MNC's legitimacy. On the other hand, the current Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2021a) shows that levels of trust, closely linked to credibility (see Newell & Goldsmith, 2001), in the UAE media are average compared to other countries in the world (see Edelman, 2021b). Building on this argumentation, we state the following hypothesis:

H4. *Media credibility mediates the effect of CD on organizational legitimacy on a moral, pragmatic, and regulative level.*

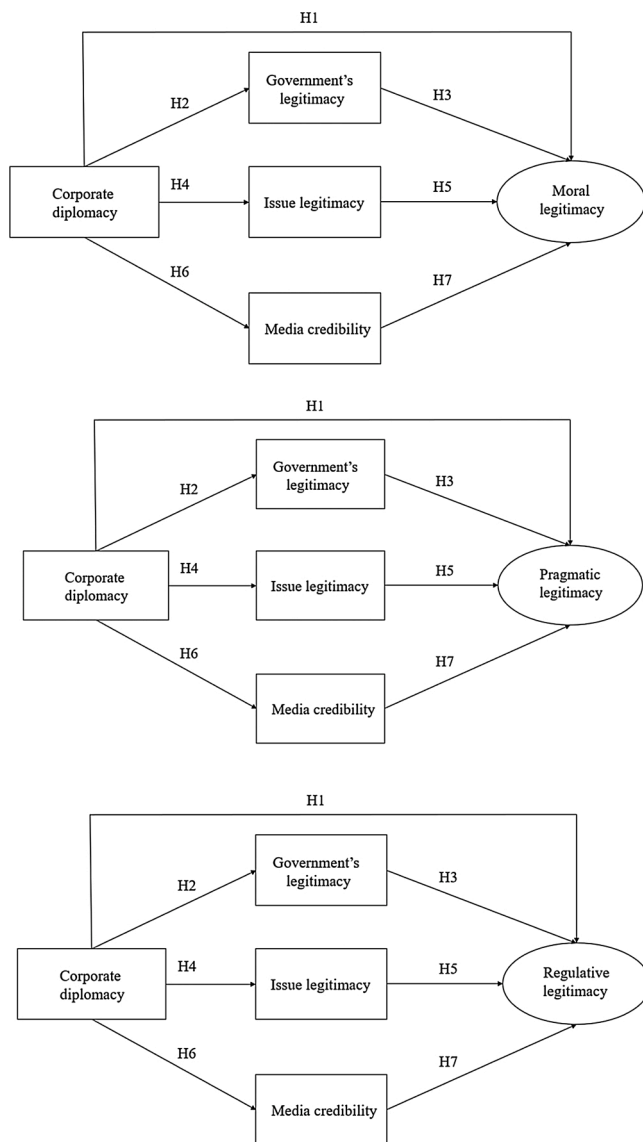


Fig. 1. Hypothesized models.

All hypotheses are summarized in our model (see Fig. 1).

4. Method

4.1. Experimental design and procedure

Our study is interested in finding out to what extent and in what way CD of a foreign MNC, performed as a public-private partnership (i.e., with governmental, institutional linkages) in the UAE, affects the perception of organizational legitimacy held by UAE residents on a moral, pragmatic, and regulative level. In addition, we are seeking to investigate the role of governmental legitimacy, issue legitimacy, and media credibility in this process. For this purpose, a single-factor between-subjects experimental design study with a survey was conducted with random assignment to one of two conditions (CD without or with governmental, institutional linkages). The experiment was conducted during November and December 2019 in three major cities of the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah). The participants were recruited by an international market research institute in Dubai. First, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Next, the participants were exposed to a newspaper article informing them about either a CD initiative of a foreign MNC without (control group) or a CD initiative

with governmental collaboration (experimental group). Following that, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire designed to measure organizational legitimacy on three levels (moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy), issue and governmental legitimacy, media credibility as well as demographics.

4.2. Sample

A random sample was drawn by the market research institute consisting of individuals that hold residence permits and have lived in the UAE for at least five years. Since the UAE population consists of a large proportion of expatriates (80–90 %), who stay in the country for a long time or even forever (De Bel-Air, 2015), it was decided to survey not only Emirati nationals but also expatriates who have been living in the UAE for at least five years. It was assumed that residents living in the UAE for a longer period feel part of the local community and are, as a result, familiar and concerned with social and political issues and corporate engagement. In addition, it was assumed that individuals who are asked to rate the legitimacy of a foreign MNC regarding its societal engagement and contribution to the local community should have some knowledge and experiences regarding the UAE community and ongoing themes. This is more likely when individuals have lived in the country for a longer time. In total, 199 individuals participated in the study, 100 in the control group (news on CD without governmental involvement) and 99 in the experimental group (news on CD with governmental involvement). Overall, participants were between 18 and 60¹ years old (24.6 % 18–29 years, 30.2 % 30–39 years, 30.2 % 40–49 years, 15.1 % 50–60 years), and 50.3 % of the sample were female.

4.3. Stimulus

The experimental stimulus material included a fictitious newspaper article about a CD initiative of a foreign MNC, either without or with institutional linkages to the UAE government. To develop the stimulus material, numerous news articles covering CD of foreign MNCs in the most important English-speaking UAE newspapers (Gulf News, Khaleej Times) (Arab Media Outlook, n.d.) were considered. This decision was made because expatriates are included in the sample, and English is one of the official languages, along with Arabic, spoken at a high level by expatriates and Emirati nationals (Dorsey, 2018). As a result, firstly, we decided to choose Danone as the CD performing actor since this corporation is popular across the UAE and has not been mentioned in relation to a critical issue in recent years (see Arabian Gazette, 2018). Secondly, we chose a CD initiative concerning public health as the inspected news articles showed a broad range of foreign MNCs from different sectors engaging in this topic, together with local governmental institutions. This approach seemed reasonable and appropriate for studying organizational legitimacy and institutional linkages in the UAE because the chosen CD topic is also of high priority for the national agenda of the UAE (UAE Government, 2018). The name of the newspaper was not given to avoid bias concerning the newspaper's source. Instead, the participants were asked to imagine reading the news recently in their ordinary local newspaper.

The CD initiative was primarily described identically in both versions of the fictitious newspaper article (see Appendix A, Fig. A1). In the article, the MNC's local executive officer was cited, highlighting the value of the CD effort for the local community and the commitment to their social values. This sought to create a perception of organizational legitimacy on a moral level (Bitektine, 2011; Suchman, 1995). Moreover, the benefits of the CD initiative for individuals were emphasized to create a perception of pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Lastly,

¹ The study in the UAE was restricted to people from 18 to 60. According to local ethical research guidelines, this study was not allowed to involve individuals older than 60.

Table 1
Variables with items and sources.

Variables and items*	Sources
Moral legitimacy	
mleg1	I have the impression that the corporation complies with social norms and values.
mleg2**	From my point of view, the corporation makes an important contribution to UAE society.
mleg3	I think the corporation promotes social welfare through its activity.
mleg4	It seems to me that the corporation acts in a way that is beneficial for the UAE society.
Pragmatic legitimacy	
pleg1	I have the impression that the corporation acts in a way that is beneficial for me.
pleg2**	In my opinion, what the corporation does in its initiative is responding to my personal interests.
pleg3	I think the corporation and what it does in its initiative has value for me.
pleg4	I think the corporation and its activities contribute to my own well-being.
Regulative legitimacy	
rleg1	I believe that the corporation follows government regulations.
rleg2	I think that the corporation and its activity meet expectations by the UAE government.
rleg3**	I believe that the corporation and its activity would be accepted by the UAE government.
rleg4	In my opinion, the corporation behaves in a way that complies with UAE governmental rules.
Governmental legitimacy	
govleg	The UAE government makes good decisions that benefit me and my surrounding.
Issue legitimacy	
issleg	I have a very positive opinion about the issue the corporation is engaged in.
Media credibility	
medcred	I believe what I read in the newspaper about this corporation and its activity.

Note: *All items were judged on a Likert scale with 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”.

**The item was deleted for the main data analysis building on the prior CFA.

the company’s commitment towards the UAE government was outlined in the news article to build regulative organizational legitimacy perceptions (see Diez-Martin et al., 2019). The two versions of the fictitious newspaper article differed in their manipulation of institutional linkages. In the experimental group, the news article had four references (one in the subtitle and three in the main text) highlighting that the CD initiative was performed by the foreign MNC together with UAE governmental institutions. This should manipulate the institutional linkage of the foreign MNC with the local government. In the control group, the references manipulating institutional linkages were missing.

4.4. Measurement

All items were rated on 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5

= strongly agree). For the measurement of moral legitimacy, we used four adapted items from prior research (Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016), including “I have the impression that the corporation complies with social norms and values.” New items were created to measure pragmatic and regulative legitimacy, building on widely applied definitions of the constructs (Bitekine, 2011; Suchman, 1995). Since pragmatic legitimacy captures the degree to which organizational actions contribute to the evaluator’s self-interests (Bitekine, 2011; Suchman, 1995), the construct was measured with four items that emphasize the personal value of CD for the evaluator and the personal benefits of the CD initiative, including “In my opinion, what the corporation does in its initiative is responding to my personal interests.” Regulative legitimacy, regarded as the perception that organizational activities comply with governmental rules and expectations (Chung et al., 2016; Diez-Martin et al., 2019), was measured with four items that reflect the congruence between CD and governmental expectations and guidelines, for instance, the statement “I think that the corporation and its activity meet expectations by the UAE government.” For the measurement of issue legitimacy (Chung et al., 2016) (M = 4.08, SD = .88) and media credibility (Finch et al., 2015) (M = 3.97, SD = 1.00), we used items slightly adapted from prior research. Governmental legitimacy was measured through a newly developed item, building on the definition of organizational legitimacy adapted to the government (Bitekine, 2011) (M = 4.11, SD = 1.00). See Table 1 for an overview of the indicator variables, their items, and the sources.

4.5. Pretest of stimulus material and measurement

For validity reasons, all items measuring organizational legitimacy and the stimulus were pretested in three steps. First, following Anderson and Gerbing (1991), a student sample (N = 14) was asked to take part in an item-sorting task. In this task, the students were given all the items and a description of each construct in everyday language. Next, they were asked to assign each item to the one construct they thought the given item indicated best. This task is the basis for a substantive-validity assessment since it results in an index “that reflects the extent to which respondents assign an item to its posited construct more than any other construct and provides a more accurate substantive validity” (Anderson & Gerbing, 1991, p. 734). Furthermore, the stimulus material and the questionnaire were tested with another student sample (N = 13) where the students were asked to evaluate the comprehensibility of each item and of the stimulus material and to rate the appropriateness of the items, building on a given description of each construct that reflected the item. This step allowed the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the wording to be improved and the fit between the item and latent variable. Lastly, for the assessment of face validity, both the stimulus and the measurement of organizational legitimacy were discussed in-depth with academic experts (N = 17). They were asked to assess each item’s appropriateness according to previous research on organizational legitimacy and the adequateness of the stimulus material to measure the effects of CD without/with governmental, institutional linkages on organizational legitimacy (see Chung et al., 2016, for a similar approach). The comments and revisions of the academic experts, and the results of the substantive validity tests with the student samples, resulted in some changes to the wording of the fictitious news article on CD. The pretest also yielded a list of four moral legitimacy, four pragmatic legitimacy, and four regulative legitimacy items (see Table 1).

4.6. Statistical measurement model validation

In the first step, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the three-dimensional specification of organizational legitimacy and, in this way, to assess the validity of the measurement model of the latent variables moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy and their developed items as observed variables (mleg1-mleg4, pleg1-pleg4, rleg1-rleg4, see Table 1 for an overview of the items). This model was

Table 2
Measurement model of the three organizational legitimacy factors with means and standard deviations after validation through the CFA.

Factor	Item	Loading on the factor	M	SD
Moral legitimacy $\alpha = 0.91$	mleg1	.919***	4.15	.878
	mleg3	.888***	4.12	.894
	mleg4	.866***	4.12	.894
Pragmatic legitimacy $\alpha = 0.92$	pleg1	.909***	3.69	.971
	pleg3	.908***	3.69	.996
	pleg4	.859***	3.77	1.022
	rleg1	.916***	4.27	.831
Regulative legitimacy $\alpha = 0.92$	rleg2	.825***	4.07	.911
	rleg4	.911***	4.26	.842

Note: *** $p < .001$.

estimated in SPSS Amos Graphics 25 using maximum-likelihood (ML) bootstrapping on 5,000 samples.

In the model, all items were significantly related to their latent variables ($p < .001$) and showed high standardized regression weights ($> .74$) (Brown, 2015). However, the overall model fit ($\chi^2(51) = 226.26$, $p < .001$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.13, CMIN/DF = 4.44, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.93, normative fit index (NFI) = 0.91, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.90, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.07) was not adequate as the mentioned values were not in line with the recommended ones (see, Brown, 2015; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Therefore, the lowest standardized parameter estimates and the largest error covariances in the modification indices were inspected (Brown, 2015; Byrne, 2001). As a result, the item with the lowest standardized estimate in each of the three factors (moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy) was deleted, and, according to the modification indices, error terms were related to the factors. In this way, the items “mleg2”, “pleg2”, and “rleg3” were deleted, the error term of “mleg 4” was related to the factor “pragmatic legitimacy,” and the error term of “rleg 1” was related to the factor “moral legitimacy.” Given the relationship of the legitimacy factors, it is permitted to correlate error terms of one factor with another factor. These changes led to a nested model with a good fit ($\chi^2(22) = 37.79$, $p = .011$, RMSEA = 0.06, CMIN/DF = 1.8, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, and SRMR = 0.03) (Brown, 2015; Hu & Bentler, 1999). In the nested model, all items were significantly related to their latent variables ($p < .001$) and showed high standardized regression weights ($> .83$) (see Table 1 for an overview of the used and deleted items). The latent variables in the measurement model form a reliable scale (moral legitimacy: Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$; $M = 4.08$, $SD = .79$; pragmatic legitimacy: Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$, $M = 3.73$, $SD = .91$; regulative legitimacy: Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$, $M = 4.20$, $SD = .76$). For an overview of the final measurement of the three legitimacy factors, see Table 2. Moreover, a correlation matrix can be found in Table A1 (in the Appendix A).

5. Results

5.1. Manipulation check

A manipulation check item asked the participants whether or not the corporation in the newspaper article they had just read engages in a healthcare initiative through a partnership with the UAE government. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether the perception of the CD engagement regarding the governmental, institutional linkage (coded as a dummy variable with 1 = yes and 2 = no) differed significantly between the control and the experimental group. Results from the ANOVA revealed significant differences in perception between the two groups ($F(1,97) = 129.91$; $p < .001$; $M_{Control} = 1.57$, $SD = .50$; $M_{Exp} = 1.00$, $SD = .00$). Therefore, the manipulation check was successful.

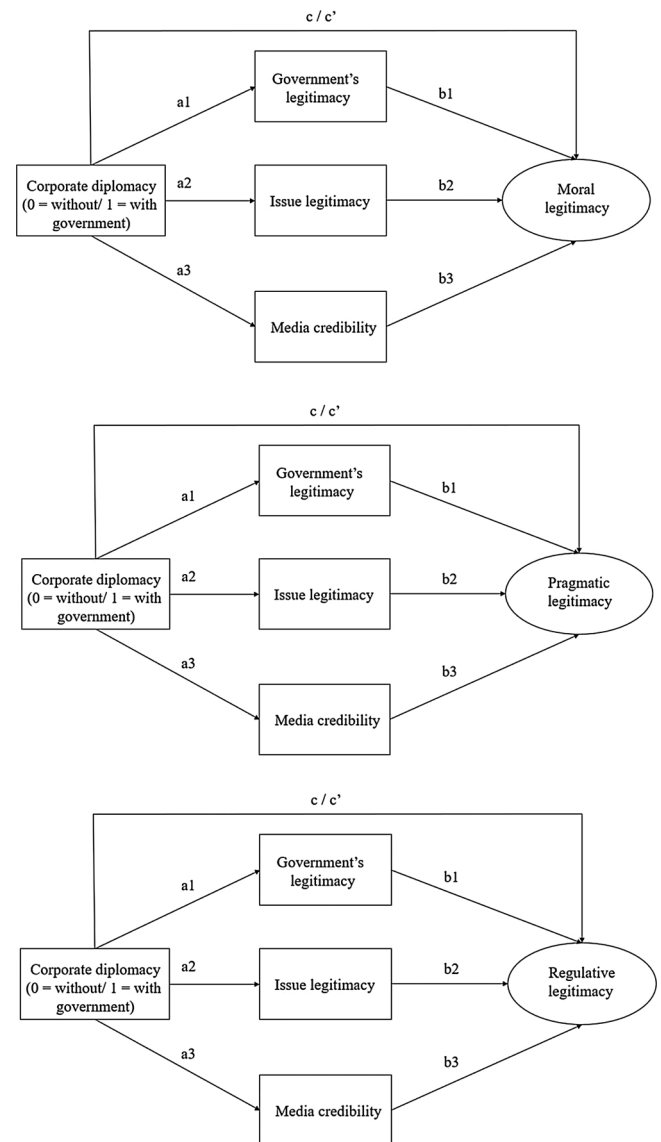


Fig. 2. Path models of the effects of CD on moral/pragmatic/regulative legitimacy.

5.2. Direct effects of CD news on organizational legitimacy

For testing the hypotheses, we ran a mediation analysis using PROCESS model 4 in SPSS 26 (Hayes, 2012, 2013, 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95 % confidence intervals (CIs) to analyze direct and indirect effects (IEs) of the CD initiative (computed as a dummy variable with 0 = without collaboration with the government, 1 = in collaboration with the government) on the dependent variables (moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy) through governmental legitimacy, issue legitimacy, and media credibility simultaneously. Each dependent variable was tested independently, resulting in three mediation models.

Hypothesis 1 stated that CD with governmental involvement affects organizational legitimacy perceptions more than CD without institutional linkages with the host country government. The results revealed that CD news has a positive significant direct path coefficient (c' path) on moral legitimacy ($b = .19$, $p = .005$, $SE = .065$) and on regulative legitimacy ($b = .19$, $p = .006$, $SE = .067$) (see Fig. 2 and Tables 3–5). These results imply that CD news with governmental, institutional linkages leads to a higher perception of moral and regulative organizational legitimacy. However, the path coefficient of CD news on pragmatic legitimacy was not significant ($b = -.17$, $p = .067$, $SE = .094$).

Table 3
Moral legitimacy model: Direct and indirect effects of the mediation steps by Hayes (2013) (5,000 Bootstrap samples).

Model	b	p	LBCI	UBCI
1. CD → moral legitimacy (c path, total effect)*	.789	<.001	.5858	.9913
2. CD → moral legitimacy (c' path, direct effect)**	.186	.005	.0561	.3152
3. CD → governmental legitimacy (a1)	.855	<.001	.6031	1.1076
4. CD → issue legitimacy (a2)	.674	<.001	.4459	.9024
5. CD → media credibility (a3)	.693	<.001	.4312	.9552
6. governmental legitimacy → moral legitimacy (b1)	.168	<.001	.1089	.3147
7. issue legitimacy → moral legitimacy (b2)	.423	<.001	.3411	.5048
8. media credibility → moral legitimacy (b3)	.242	<.001	.1700	.3147
9. Indirect effects				
CD → governmental legitimacy → moral legitimacy***	.207	sign	.1114	.3198
CD → issue legitimacy → moral legitimacy***	.284	sign	.1572	.4229
CD → media credibility → moral legitimacy***	.240	sign	.1265	.3800

Note: CD = Corporate Diplomacy; *R² = .23, p < .001; **R² = .76, p < .001; ***partially standardized indirect effect.

Table 4
Pragmatic legitimacy model: Direct and indirect effects of the mediation steps by Hayes (2013) (5,000 Bootstrap samples).

Model	b	p	LBCI	UBCI
1. CD → pragmatic legitimacy (c path, total effect)*	.493	<.001	.2434	.7426
2. CD → pragmatic legitimacy (c' path, direct effect)**	-.174	.067	-.3594	.0122
3. CD → governmental legitimacy (a1)	.855	<.001	.6031	1.1076
4. CD → issue legitimacy (a2)	.674	<.001	.4459	.9024
5. CD → media credibility (a3)	.693	<.001	.4312	.9552
6. governmental legitimacy → pragmatic legitimacy (b1)	.176	<.001	.0758	.2757
7. issue legitimacy → pragmatic legitimacy (b2)	.502	<.001	.3638	.6398
8. media credibility → pragmatic legitimacy (b3)	.257	<.001	.1347	.3787
9. Indirect effects				
CD → governmental legitimacy → pragmatic legitimacy***	.163	sign	.0576	.2991
CD → issue legitimacy → pragmatic legitimacy***	.366	sign	.2221	.5285
CD → media credibility → pragmatic legitimacy***	.193	sign	.0857	.3110

Note: CD = Corporate Diplomacy; *R² = .07, p < .001; **R² = .61, p < .001; ***partially standardized indirect effect.

implying that the perception of organizational legitimacy on a pragmatic level is not affected by the appearance of institutional linkages in CD news in comparison with the absence of such linkages. Therefore, hypothesis 1 can only be supported for moral and regulative legitimacy.

5.3. Indirect effects of CD news on organizational legitimacy

To test hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, positing a mediating effect of CD news on organizational legitimacy (moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy), the results of the mediation analyses were again considered. Three steps are necessary for evaluating the indirect effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable through one or more mediating variables (Hayes, 2013, 2018; MacKinnon, 2008). Accordingly, first, the effects of the independent variable on the mediator variable are calculated. Second, the effects of the mediator variable on the dependent variable are analyzed. Third, the indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable through the mediator variable is calculated (MacKinnon, 2008).

Table 5
Regulative legitimacy model: Direct and indirect effects of the mediation steps by Hayes (2013) (5,000 Bootstrap samples).

Model	b	p	LBCI	UBCI
1. CD → regulative legitimacy (c path, total effect)*	.786	<.001	.5924	.9795
2. CD → regulative legitimacy (c' path, direct effect)**	.186	.006	.0542	.3177
3. CD → governmental legitimacy (a1)	.855	<.001	.6031	1.1076
4. CD → issue legitimacy (a2)	.674	<.001	.4459	.9024
5. CD → media credibility (a3)	.693	<.001	.4312	.9552
6. governmental legitimacy → regulative legitimacy (b1)	.373	<.001	.3023	.4441
7. issue legitimacy → regulative legitimacy (b2)	.249	<.001	.1516	.3472
8. media credibility → regulative legitimacy (b3)	.163	<.001	.0760	.2490
9. Indirect effects				
CD → governmental legitimacy → regulative legitimacy***	.402	sign	.2748	.5399
CD → issue legitimacy → regulative legitimacy***	.212	sign	.0972	.3445
CD → media credibility → regulative legitimacy***	.142	sign	.0418	.2718

Note: CD = Corporate Diplomacy; *R² = .25, p < .001; **R² = .73, p < .001; ***partially standardized indirect effect.

For the first step, the results of this study showed a significant positive direct effect of the independent variable on media credibility (b = .69, p < .001, SE = .133) and issue legitimacy (b = .67, p < .001, SE = .116) and governmental legitimacy (b = .86, p < .001, SE = .128). Concerning the second step, all three mediation models revealed a significant positive direct effect of governmental legitimacy, issue legitimacy, and media credibility on each of the outcome variables (moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy) (see Fig. 2 and Tables 3–5). With regard to the third step, the results showed that all indirect effects are significant. In particular, the indirect effects of the CD initiative without/with governmental involvement on moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy through media credibility was significantly positive (moral legitimacy: Indirect Effect² (IE) = .240, SE = .066, 95 % CI [.127,.380]; pragmatic legitimacy: IE = .193, SE = .058, 95 % CI [.086,.311]; regulative legitimacy: IE = .142, SE = .058, 95 % CI [.042,.272]). Furthermore, the analysis showed that the CD initiative without/with governmental linkages has a significant indirect positive effect on moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy through issue legitimacy (moral legitimacy: IE = .284, SE = .067, 95 % CI [.157,.423]; pragmatic legitimacy: IE = .366, SE = .078, 95 % CI [.222,.529]; regulative legitimacy: IE = .211, SE = .063, 95 % CI [.097,.345]). Similarly, the data analysis revealed that there is a significant positive effect of the CD news without/with governmental involvement on moral, pragmatic, and regulative legitimacy through governmental legitimacy (moral legitimacy: IE = .207, SE = .053, 95 % CI [.111,.320]; pragmatic legitimacy: IE = .163, SE = .062, 95 % CI [.058,.299]; regulative legitimacy: IE = .402, SE = .068, 95 % CI [.275,.540]). The absence of zero in the confidence intervals (CI) suggests that media credibility, governmental legitimacy, and issue legitimacy serve as significant mediators between the CD news and each of the dependent variables (see Appendix A, Fig. 2 and Tables 3–5). Lastly, the overall mediation models for each of the outcome variables were significant (moral legitimacy mediation model: F(4, 194) = 154.69, p < .001, R² = .76; pragmatic legitimacy mediation model: F(4, 194) = 75.67, p < .001, R² = .61; regulative legitimacy mediation model: F(4, 194) = 134.20, p < .001, R² = .73). In all three legitimacy models, the path coefficients of the independent on the mediator variables and of the mediator on the dependent variables and the indirect effects of the independent on the dependent variables

² All indirect effects are partially standardized (Hayes, 2013).

through the mediators were significant. Therefore, hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 can be supported. However, it must be noted that the effect of CD news on pragmatic legitimacy was fully mediated since the direct effect was not significant (see the results in the previous section). In contrast, the effects of CD news on moral and regulative legitimacy were partially mediated as both direct and indirect effects are significant.

Furthermore, to explore differences between the mediators, the strengths of the indirect effects of the three mediating variables were compared for each legitimacy model (moral, pragmatic, and regulative) using the contrast module in PROCESS (v 3.4) (for this approach, see [Rauwers et al., 2018](#)). First, in the moral legitimacy model, the results did not reveal significant differences between the indirect effects of governmental legitimacy and issue legitimacy ($contrast = .078^3$, $SE = .083$, 95 % CI[-.087,.238]), implying that the strengths of both mediating variables on the effect of the independent variable on organizational legitimacy are similar. This is due to the confidence interval (CI) that includes zero ([Hayes, 2013](#); [Rauwers et al., 2018](#)). Comparing the indirect effects of governmental legitimacy and media credibility ($contrast = .034^4$, $SE = .091$, 95 % CI[-.133,.222]), as well as issue legitimacy and media credibility ($contrast = .044^5$, $SE = .102$, 95 % CI [-.165,.236]), the results showed no significant differences. This result indicates that governmental legitimacy and media credibility, as well as issue legitimacy and media credibility, similarly influence the outcome variable.

For the pragmatic legitimacy model, the comparison of the indirect effects revealed that they do not significantly differ as the confidence intervals include zero. In particular, neither governmental legitimacy and issue legitimacy ($contrast = .203^6$, $SE = .110$, 95 % CI[-.009,.421]) nor governmental legitimacy and media credibility significantly differ ($contrast = .030^7$, $SE = .084$, 95 % CI[-.146,.186]). Similarly, the difference between issue legitimacy and media credibility was not significant ($contrast = .174^8$, $SE = .101$, 95 % CI[-.013,.387]). These results imply that the indirect effect strengths of the three mediators are similar.

Lastly, the strengths of the indirect effects on regulative legitimacy were compared. The results showed that governmental legitimacy and media credibility ($contrast = -.260^9$, $SE = .097$, 95 % CI[-.450,-.068]) as well as governmental legitimacy and issue legitimacy ($contrast = -.190^{10}$, $SE = .093$, 95 % CI[-.372,-.009]) significantly differ in their indirect effects, indicating that the indirect effect of governmental legitimacy is significantly higher than the indirect effect of media credibility or issue legitimacy. This is due to the higher coefficient of governmental legitimacy in comparison to media credibility and issue legitimacy. The comparison between issue legitimacy and media credibility ($contrast = .070^{11}$, $SE = .100$, 95 % CI[-.132,.260]) revealed no significant differences. Therefore, the results suggest that issue legitimacy and media credibility are similar in their indirect effect strengths.

³ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was issue legitimacy minus governmental legitimacy.

⁴ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was media credibility minus governmental legitimacy.

⁵ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was issue legitimacy minus media credibility.

⁶ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was issue legitimacy minus governmental legitimacy.

⁷ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was media credibility minus governmental legitimacy.

⁸ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was issue legitimacy minus media credibility.

⁹ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was media credibility minus governmental legitimacy.

¹⁰ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was issue legitimacy minus governmental legitimacy.

¹¹ For analyzing the difference in the strengths of the indirect effects, the calculation was issue legitimacy minus media credibility.

6. Discussion

6.1. Direct effects of CD on organizational legitimacy

This paper investigated whether and how the perception of CD news differs in its effects on moral, pragmatic, and regulative organizational legitimacy in the host country environment, depending on whether CD is displayed with or without governmental involvement. The current study shows that, when it comes to direct effects, moral and regulative legitimacy perceptions of the wider local community are significantly higher due to institutional linkages between an organization and the host country government. Pragmatic legitimacy was not directly affected by the independent variable (CD news with/without institutional linkages). This result implies that the presence of governmental, institutional linkages does not directly influence perceptions of the extent to which CD contributes to personal, individual interests in terms of pragmatic legitimacy. However, the perception of the extent to which CD might be in line with governmental expectations (in terms of regulative legitimacy) and moral values (in terms of moral legitimacy) is higher when the government is involved in the CD initiative. This finding might be explained by the cultural and political particularities of the UAE. Public-private partnerships are highly valued and encouraged in the Middle East region due to the collectivist relationship-oriented culture and the government's power ([Jamali & Sidani, 2012](#); [Kirat, 2005](#); [White & Alkandari, 2019](#)). Moreover, the government has made several commitments towards its community to improve social well-being ([Sabouni, 2017](#)), which might generally lead to the perception that governmental activities seek to contribute to societal issues – at least in the context of CD in this study.¹²

As previous research has highlighted, the political and cultural systems in the respective host country are major factors determining global PR ([Siramesh & Verčič, 2002](#)). In a non-democratic country where the government possesses significant institutional power, CD in collaboration with governmental actors appears to be a promising PR approach to gain and secure legitimacy. While [Mogensen's study \(2017\)](#) has suggested that foreign MNCs should engage directly with the host country's citizens, our study shows that, as a first step, CD should be directed towards the host country's government. As our results imply, MNCs can still address the local community through direct engagement with the government and even build legitimacy towards them. However, the issue of power disparities needs to be considered when it comes to public-private partnerships and societal contributions. From a neo-institutional perspective, institutional linkages can be regarded as "the target of external pressures toward normative conformity with the institutional environment" ([Baum & Oliver, 1991, p. 214](#)). Applied to the case of the UAE, it appears that organizations also feel the pressure to engage in collaborations with the government since it possesses significant power and enables access to essential resources and actors. However, CD initiatives should neither result from power abuse from the host country government nor from the MNC itself. Therefore, as [Mogensen \(2019\)](#) has suggested, different groups within the organizational environment should be included in the decision-making process regarding CD efforts.

Relating the concept of institutional linkages to organization-public relationships, our study implies that an organization can profit from the relationship to an established legitimate organization by gaining

¹² The UAE has been criticized frequently for its violation of human rights, which would stand in contradiction to the assumed perception of the government as contributing to social well-being. However, the respondents in this study showed a high level of acceptance towards the government and its efforts, as indicated by high numbers of the variable "governmental legitimacy." In this regard, the assumption seems plausible. However, this result might also have been affected by social desirability issues, which are discussed further in the limitations section.

organizational legitimacy. One reason might be that an organization's relationship with an established institution is perceived as being of high quality. According to Wiggill (2014), legitimacy derives from high-quality organization-public relationships, and, as Lock (2019) highlighted, legitimacy is a critical facet of relationships. Our results illustrate that the government's perceived legitimacy partially mediates the effect of CD on organizational legitimacy. In this regard, it seems reasonable to assume that the perceived quality of an organization-public relationship is related to both the organization's legitimacy and the legitimacy of the other actor involved. As White and Alkandari (2019) have found, cooperation between the public and private sector in the Middle East "is perceived as having mutual benefits that work for the common good. It helps the government increase its number of activities to benefit society [and] [...] helps the private sector [...] work[ing] with public institutions that are specialized in addressing their [social needs]" (p. 7). Our study adds to White and Alkandari (2019) by emphasizing the role of governmental, institutional linkages for CD in relationship cultivation.

6.2. Indirect effects of CD on organizational legitimacy: the role of governmental and issue legitimacy as well as media credibility

In addition to the direct impact of CD news (without/with institutional linkages) on organizational legitimacy, the results suggest that CD affects organizational legitimacy indirectly through governmental and issue legitimacy as well as media credibility. These findings support previous literature on factors affecting organizational legitimacy (Chung et al., 2016; Finch et al., 2015). First, our results confirm Baum and Oliver's (1991) assumption that institutional linkages only affect organizational legitimacy when the institution itself is perceived as legitimate. Second, our results reveal that the more favorable is the perception of the issue the corporation engages in, the more likely it is that an organization gains legitimacy. This finding adds to Boyd's (2000) argumentation that PR strategies must be based on individual, organizational issues rather than relying on the organization's general (legitimacy) perception. Third, in line with previous research (Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016; Finch et al., 2015), our results indicate that the credibility of the organization's evaluating source significantly affects organizational legitimacy. This result can be explained by the perception of the message content: "[I]f an information source, such as a [...] media outlet, is perceived as more credible on a subject, individuals are more likely to be influenced by its messages" (Finch et al., 2015, p. 268; see also Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999), which might, in turn, enhance organizational legitimacy. Interestingly, the mediating effect of governmental legitimacy is particularly significant when it comes to the effect of CD on regulative legitimacy. According to our results, the effect of CD news with governmental involvement is significantly higher when mediated through governmental legitimacy. This result implies that MNCs that seek to gain regulative legitimacy should be aware of the perceived appropriateness of the local government.

6.3. Theoretical and practical implications

By exploring CD as a legitimation strategy and measuring the effects of institutional linkages on the perception of CD news, our current study has several theoretical and practical implications. First, the current study contributes to the increasing body of CD research, which still lacks empirical studies. Our findings advance previous conceptual papers linking CD to legitimacy (Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009; Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2015) by providing insights into how CD efforts can be successful in seeking organizational legitimacy. Secondly, and related to this, our study significantly contributes to PR and legitimacy research by providing, in an international setting, an empirically tested research instrument to measure organizational legitimacy in the context of PR that can be further applied to future research. In this regard, we extend previous research outlining the role of PR for gaining legitimacy

(e.g., Merckelsen, 2013; Metzler, 2000; Wæraas, 2018). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research instrument that accounts for three levels of legitimacy (moral, pragmatic, and regulative).

Third, we advance the understanding of organization-public relationships by applying the concept of institutional linkages to PR and empirically testing the effects of organization-public relationships on organizational legitimacy. In this way, we contribute to the discussion of previous scholars on the dimensions and outcomes of relationship management (for instance, Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Wiggill, 2014). Fourth, by integrating neo-institutional approaches as well as empirical results from organization studies, we add to and extend PR research emphasizing and discussing neo-institutional PR (for instance, Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014; Sandhu, 2009).

Moreover, this research has practical implications by offering insights on how to meet the expectations of an organization's environment through public and media relations. In this regard, our study suggests that CD performed and demonstrated as a public-private partnership allows foreign MNCs to overcome the liability of foreignness (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999), which is a significant barrier upon entry and after becoming established. Moreover, proactively engaging in legitimacy-seeking efforts may protect MNCs' social acceptance in the host country in times of crisis (see Denk et al., 2012). Furthermore, our analysis emphasized the role of representing social values and demands for the success of CD efforts. However, in addition to addressing the social values and expectations on a local community level, foreign MNCs should also be aware of universal and home country values in the case of international initiatives (see, e.g., La Porte, 2012). Lastly, the current study points to the role of issue legitimacy for establishing organizational legitimacy. Accordingly, organizations should reinforce the perception that the issue is of public interest (see Chung et al., 2016).

6.4. Limitations and future research

Despite the numerous theoretical and practical contributions, a few limitations that offer directions for future research should also be noted. Potential limitations come with the used method and the related issues of generalizability and social desirability. Our sample consisted of people living in one specific country with particularities concerning its media, political, and cultural system. In this regard, future research could explore the extent to which institutional linkages to the government affect organizational legitimacy in non-democratic countries where the government might be perceived as less influential when it comes to societal issues. Given the nature of the country's political context, in which pluralistic opinions are less valued and freedom of expression is minimal, the participants might have tried to respond consistently with what might be expected within the prevailing political ideology. In this way, the participants' self-report might have been influenced more by social desirability than personal beliefs, particularly concerning the responses on governmental legitimacy and regulative organizational legitimacy. However, we took several steps to reduce this threat, including gathering data anonymously and emphasizing that the study aims to collect answers that reflect the participants' honest, personal views. Due to the country's particularities in terms of its political, media, and cultural system, we cannot generalize our results. Future research is necessary to test our model in other contexts, e.g., in democratic countries with a free media system.

Furthermore, our mediating variables consisted of single-item measures, making it impossible to control for random measurement error, resulting in potential reliability and validity issues. However, previous research comparing single-item measures to a scale with several items and found only a "trivial difference" (Wanous & Hudy, 2001, p. 374). In PR research, single-item measures have also previously been used in surveys (e.g., Cacciato et al., 2016), including for the measurement of the mediating variables (Dozier et al., 2016).

As the study by White and Kolesnicov (2015) showed, some companies are not yet familiar with the term "corporate diplomacy," which

may limit our study's face validity (see [Hardesty & Bearden, 2004](#)). However, both the stimulus and the questionnaire were extensively pretested in advance, including in discussions with academic experts. Our conceptualization and operationalization of CD and the developed stimulus were discussed, and changes were made accordingly, increasing the study's face validity (see [Hardesty & Bearden, 2004](#)). The definition we used is based on a broad review of the available literature ([Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019](#); [Kochhar, 2018](#); [Mogensen, 2017](#); [Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021](#)), increasing the overall construct validity (see [Strauss & Smith, 2009](#)).

Moreover, although surveys offer valuable access to beliefs and evaluations at a given time, longitudinal research is necessary to assess to what extent and how legitimacy perceptions may change over time. Other empirical methods and the addition of further factors affecting organizational legitimacy (see, for instance, [Bitekine, 2011](#)) could help to provide deeper insights into the social legitimation process of MNCs. Furthermore, given the rise of social media and its increasing relevance as an evaluating source of organizational legitimacy ([Etter et al., 2018](#)), future research might explore CD, institutional linkages, and legitimacy on social media, accounting for the platforms' particularities. Lastly, although we have discussed the link between institutional linkages and organization-public relationships, this study did not explicitly measure the participants' perception of the relationship quality between the MNC and the government. Our study attempted to analyze differences in CD news with or without government involvement and, therefore, measured organization-public relationships in terms of the existence or absence of institutional linkages. Future research could measure to what extent the evaluation of the given organization-public relationship (see for an overview, [Huang & Zhang, 2015](#)) affects organizational legitimacy.

7. Conclusion

For foreign MNCs, it is critical to gain and secure organizational legitimacy in the global arena and, in this regard, also in the host country. Corporate diplomacy is a valid approach to meet societal

expectations and values within the host society and to gain legitimacy. This study emphasizes, in particular, the importance of collaborations with established host country institutions, in our case, the local government. As [Kochhar \(2018\)](#) has already stated, "[c]orporate diplomacy emphasizes how the legitimacy of an organization depends on its ability to meet the expectations of an increasingly numerous and diverse array of constituents in the given nonmarket business environment" (p. 350). The current study supports this statement by exploring how corporate diplomacy affects the perception of organizational legitimacy on a moral, pragmatic, and regulative level. Applying neo-institutionalism and PR approaches, this study shows that CD needs to build on PR to cultivate institutional relationships to achieve the perception of congruence between CD activities and the expectations and values on an individual, governmental, and social level in the host country. The role of PR then lies in firstly, the cultivation of relationships with established actors in the host country and, secondly, the demonstration of CD as a contribution to personal interests and values, to the government's expectations, and the whole community in the host country. By analyzing CD through the lens of PR, this study provided substantial insights into how MNCs can actively seek to gain legitimacy through the demonstration of institutional linkages, which has not been explored before.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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Appendix A

"Danone for Healthier Life" reaches 4,000 people in the UAE

Ministry of Health collaborates with Danone Middle East celebrating "Danone for Healthier Life" week

BYLINE: Staff Reporter
LENGTH: 192 words

Over 2,600 students and 1,400 adults from across the United Arab Emirates (UAE) participated in this year's "Danone for Healthier Life" week, coming with healthy cooking and diabetes awareness events across the UAE.

Roger Miller, business executive officer at Danone Middle East, commented: "In partnership with the Ministry of Health, our 'Danone for Healthier Life' initiative again reached thousands of UAE residents. For us at Danone, it is essential to give something back to the society we operate in, and this initiative is a testament to the values and sense of community in the UAE."

Within the project, initiated by Danone Middle East, together with the UAE government, participants had the opportunity to attend workshops to learn about diabetes. In addition, residents had the chance to team up with seasoned chefs to prepare healthy meals and to get free blood sugar checks.

As Miller added, "By showing how to eat and live healthily, Danone, in collaboration with its partner the Ministry of Health, is committed to supporting the local community to achieve the highest standards of health." For interested people, Danone is offering an information kit with nutrition guidelines and Diabetes FAQs.

Fig. A1. Stimulus. CD with institutional linkages to the government.

Table A1

Correlation matrix of the variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	M*	SD
1. Moral legitimacy	1					4.08	.79
2. Pragmatic legitimacy	.663**	1				3.73	.91
3. Regulative legitimacy	.843**	.612**	1			4.20	.76
4. Media credibility	.770**	.681**	.671**	1		3.97	1.00
5. Issue legitimacy	.777**	.731**	.687**	.720**	1	4.08	.88
6. Governmental legitimacy	.631**	.507**	.747**	.485**	.468**	4.11	1.00

Note: N = 199.

*All items were judged on a Likert-scale with 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree".

**Correlation is significant ($p < .01$) (two-sided).

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