

# What is the quack about? Legitimation strategies and their perceived appropriateness in the foie gras industry

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## Abstract

This study contributes to the legitimacy literature by investigating the perceived appropriateness of legitimation strategies used by controversial organizations. Through a mixed-method approach comprising interviews and conjoint experiments, we shed light on how evaluators perceive the appropriateness of five legitimation strategies used by the foie gras industry in France and how evaluators' environmentalism and media skepticism influence their perceptions. Some strategies favored by the industry are perceived as inappropriate by evaluators and thus may obstruct or, worse, counter the intended goal of legitimacy enhancement. Moreover, we observe that evaluators' high environmentalism and high media skepticism affect the perceived appropriateness of the strategies, albeit not of all five. Evaluators with high media skepticism favor explanation discourses and strategies that establish a common identity of the industry. Evaluators with high environmentalism favor the use of recognizable quality standards and labels, yet they are wary of high levels of organization through structured representation of industry interests.

## KEYWORDS

conjoint experiments, controversial organizations, foie gras, legitimacy perceptions, legitimation strategies, mixed-methods

## INTRODUCTION

Controversial organizations are organizations that face systematic and continuous challenges to their legitimacy. Fulfilling the demands from stakeholders on one side of the controversy may entail violating the demands of stakeholders and on the other side complicating the legitimacy management of such organizations (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Reast et al., 2013; Siraz et al., 2023). Controversial organizations are prevalent in all economies in a variety of sectors (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, gaming, intensive agriculture, genetically modified crops, adult entertainment, or stem cell research). This paper focuses on the foie gras industry, an interesting example of one such industry.

Foie gras is a controversial product obtained by force-feeding ducks or geese during the final 2 weeks

before slaughter. While foie gras is considered a delicacy by many, its production process raises strong objections from animal welfare activists who aim to stop force feeding. The controversy around foie gras reflects a complex ongoing battle between the public, animal activists, foie gras producers, legislators, and courts, in which arguments for and against it are of crucial importance in influencing social perceptions (DeSoucey, 2016). Maintaining the perception of legitimacy is important, as actors with higher legitimacy survive longer and have fewer constraints in acquiring resources than those with lower legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Suchman, 1995).

While scholars have examined how organizations gain, maintain, and repair legitimacy in the market (e.g., Suchman, 1995), relatively few studies specifically focus on organizations in controversial industries (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2016; Du & Vieira, 2012) despite the acknowledgment of the “chronic, persistent, and significant legitimacy issues” (Reast et al., 2013, p. 140) for such

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organizations and their impact on organizational activities and industry maintenance. Yet such studies are fundamental for getting better insights into how organizations in controversial industries manage their legitimacy given the close relationship between legitimacy, performance, and long-term survival (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). Moreover, recent theoretical studies call for further research to investigate legitimacy as a dynamic interaction between a focal subject of legitimacy (e.g., a business activity/organization/industry) and its evaluators (Schoon, 2022; Siraz et al., 2023). Indeed, we argue that how evaluators perceive legitimacy strategies is a fundamental yet under-researched aspect of the effectiveness of legitimacy strategies. Therefore, it is not only crucial to investigate which strategies controversial organizations take but equally important to reveal how evaluators, towards whom these strategies are directed, perceive them. Considering the higher degree of scrutiny that controversial organizations face, misguided or ineffective approaches towards legitimacy can be particularly detrimental.

To address these knowledge gaps, our study investigates how a controversial industry deals with opposing legitimacy judgments through legitimacy strategies. We then examine the extent to which evaluators perceive these legitimacy strategies as appropriate. Moreover, we contend that the degree to which a legitimacy strategy is deemed appropriate by an evaluator is also contingent on the inherent characteristics of that evaluator (Finch et al., 2015). In the context of the foie gras, in particular, evaluators' stance about environmental issues (including aspects of animal welfare) and the extent to which they are influenced by the media—being a dominant source of information about foie gras—play a fundamental role in shaping evaluators' perceptions (DeSoucey, 2016).

We take the following steps to answer our research questions. First, we conduct interviews with actors in the foie gras industry in France, the world's leading foie gras producer, to explore the different strategies taken to address opposing opinions. Second, we examine the extent to which evaluators find these strategies appropriate through a series of conjoint experiments. Third, we investigate how evaluators' environmentalism and media skepticism moderate the relationship between legitimacy strategies and their perceived appropriateness. We find that some strategies favored by the industry are perceived as inappropriate by evaluators and thus may negatively affect legitimacy enhancement. Our study contributes to legitimacy literature by establishing that it is essential for scholars and practitioners to recognize that legitimacy constitutes a dynamic interaction between a subject of legitimacy and those who evaluate its legitimacy (Schoon, 2022; Siraz et al., 2023). Effective legitimacy then cannot be limited to devising legitimacy strategies but additionally requires the simultaneous consideration of how appropriate evaluators perceive these strategies.

Moreover, considering legitimation strategies and their perceived appropriateness only provides a partial understanding of the legitimation process. By integrating the effects of evaluators' personal characteristics into the legitimation evaluation process, our research further extends the legitimacy literature (Finch et al., 2015). This is substantiated by our findings that evaluators' high environmentalism and high media skepticism affect the perceived appropriateness of the strategies albeit not in the same way.

## CONTROVERSY, LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES, AND EVALUATORS' PERCEPTIONS

Organizations (or even entire industries) are deemed legitimate when their actions are perceived acceptable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). Organizations with higher levels of legitimacy survive longer and have fewer constraints in acquiring resources than those with lower levels of legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). Controversial organizations find their legitimacy challenged by a different interpretation the prevalent norms, values, and beliefs or by the presence of two or more competing sets of norms, values, and beliefs in society (Bascle, 2016). Controversy thus reflects an ongoing discussion within a society not only about what is "right" and "wrong" but also about how society should respond to those "rights" and "wrongs."

We theorize that controversial organizations exhibit the following characteristics: first, their intrinsic nature is at the core of social debates, wherein their legitimacy is considered (Reast et al., 2013). Second, the continuity of their activities is significantly affected by the legislature in defining their legality (Hiatt & Sangchan, 2013; Schapiro, 2011). Third, the acceptability of their products, production methods, services, or business conduct results in continuous tension between groups of evaluators due to their divergent perceptions (Gond et al., 2016). Thus, the degree of controversy reflects the level of disagreement between evaluating audiences (Doh & Guay, 2006; Kurzer & Cooper, 2007).

Divergence in legitimacy judgments is a considerable risk factor for organizations. Controversial organizations might be forced to choose between adjusting their actions to satisfy the expectations of their opponents (thereby gaining their support for the organization's legitimacy claim) and persisting in their present orientation to retain the support of their proponents, without the certainty that their proponents' arguments will prevail (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2016). In choosing to address the concerns of their opponents, they may strain their relationship with their proponents and vice versa (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990).

While literature provides a "catalog" of potential legitimation strategies (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Siraz

et al., 2023; Vaara et al., 2006), the evaluating audience may not perceive all legitimation strategies as appropriate, even when such strategies are common practice or are otherwise argued to strengthen an organization's legitimacy. Elsbach (1994) provides a case in point in the context of cattle farmers in California. She relates how the attempts by cattle farmers to invalidate the challenges to their legitimacy, by denying their truth or existence, proved less effective than acknowledging and explaining them. In other instances, denial can be a very powerful tool to legitimize the actions of an organization or even an entire industry. Using a different approach, the tobacco industry has used arguments of "freedom of choice" and authorization (Hiatt & Sangchan, 2013; Vaara & Tienari, 2008) to legitimize the act of smoking (and, by extension, the production and commercialization of tobacco products). Nevertheless, smoking in public has been banned in many places following pressure from "freedom to breathe" campaigners and health authorities (Bayer & Colgrove, 2002) who did not perceive the tobacco industry's strategy to be appropriate from a moral standpoint (Vaara et al., 2006). Thus, while literature identifies both the argumentation and authorization discourses as valid means of legitimation, the effectiveness of the adopted discursive strategy depends on how evaluators perceive them.

The degree to which evaluators perceive legitimation strategies appropriate is affected by a multitude of factors, including individual norms, values, and beliefs, as well as the extent to which evaluators are aware of, or find the given information credible (Deephouse et al., 2017). In the context of the foie gras industry, diverging opinions are often related to environmental concerns about the congruence between animal well-being and force-feeding (DeSoucey, 2016). Evaluators holding stronger environmental values will likely be more critical of strategies developed by the industry unless they effectively address the practice of force-feeding. Moreover, considering that many evaluators obtain information about foie gras through the media, many legitimation strategies involve crafting a favorable image to convince evaluators of the legitimacy of foie gras. According to Deephouse et al. (2017), the media is an important source of information that strongly influences the legitimacy perceptions of evaluators. However, the extent to which media does so will likely depend on evaluators' skepticism towards it (Meyer, 1988). We therefore also investigate the extent to which evaluators' environmental values (Shepherd et al., 2009) and media skepticism (Meyer, 1988) moderate the relationship between the legitimation strategies used in the foie gras industry and their perceived appropriateness by evaluators.

## CONTEXT AND METHOD

Since the time of the ancient Egyptians, foie gras has become part of the culinary tradition of many countries

around the world. In 2004, it obtained a cultural legacy status in France. However, objections to the production of foie gras significantly increased in recent decades and reached a level that creates significant uncertainty for the industry. In the European Union (EU), some countries, such as Germany, have explicitly banned the production of foie gras, but owing to the common market, the sale of the product cannot be banned. Even in France in 2015, the first judiciary case regarding foie gras and potential breaches of animal rights took place adding to the controversy. The French foie gras industry is the dominant player in the global foie gras industry and makes a sizable contribution to the French economy (annual turnover of over €1.5 billion and employing over 100,000 people). The French foie gras industry is thus an appropriate and interesting context to study controversial industries.

We carried out a mixed-method investigation comprising a qualitative and a quantitative study, following the recommendations of Creswell et al. (2011), whereby the findings from our qualitative study informed the design of the quantitative study. Data collection comprised interviews with actors in the foie gras industry and conjoint experiments with evaluators from the general public. The aim of the interviews was to gather data about which legitimation strategies were being used within the industry. We then investigated how evaluators judged the appropriateness of these legitimation strategies.

## The qualitative study

Obtaining data from foie gras producers is notoriously difficult. Due to the nature of the business, journalists and activists have used a wide array of deceptive methods to gain access to the organizations and have published articles and imagery that have been very damaging to the industry. Despite these circumstances, we gained access to primary informants in the industry.

Primary data were collected in the summer and fall of 2015. During the period in which we sought access to producers, media attention was focused on the lawsuit brought against one of the leading foie gras producers by five duck breeders (*Philippe Lapaque et al. against Euralis for Delpyrat*) and around the case brought against the foie gras producer known as "Soulard" by an activist group known as "L214" in the first judiciary case about the ill-treatment of ducks, thereby deepening the prevalent mistrust of the industry towards external information seekers. It should be noted that in both cases, the foie gras producers were ultimately not recognized as having breached the law. We conducted interviews with five foie gras producers including two of the world's largest producers, two smaller producers that were affiliated with larger organizations, and one independent producer.

Furthermore, we conducted interviews with the three main industry associations, which represent a total

of approximately 8,000 producers. The industry associations, some of which are headed by foie gras producers, represent the aggregate voice of the foie gras producers in France. Interviewing all three associations allowed us to evaluate the opinions of many foie gras producers to whom individual access would have been beyond the resources of this project. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of legitimacy management in this industry, we also conducted interviews with activist groups that are opposed to foie gras production.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted. The interviews in the first round lasted between 20 and 180 min (with a mean of just over 120 min). Driven by negative experiences in the past, only one of the interviewees consented to the interview being recorded. Therefore, upon completion, the interviews were synthesized, and the reports were returned to the interviewees to be checked for accuracy; this was followed by the second round of shorter interviews, which lasted up to 60 min (mean ~15 min). When follow-up interviews could not be arranged, the interviewees validated the reports by mail. Once we confirmed its accuracy, an interview was deemed suitable for analysis. Table 1 provides a synthetic view of the interviews conducted.

For reasons of access and familiarity, one of the authors conducted all the interviews. However, all authors collectively analyzed the data, and any differences in the interpretation of the identified legitimacy practices were solved through a discussion considering the relevant literature on legitimacy management (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Each organization was subsequently reinterpreted in a comparative manner. We then followed an iterative approach of analysis, moving back and forth between the data and the emerging legitimacy strategies (Eisenhardt, 1989). For every strategy

extracted from the data, we enhanced its validity by corroborating it across the different foie gras organizations within the industry.

## Findings from the qualitative study

We extracted five core legitimization strategies:

1. Managing legitimacy through organized industry structures (strategies for structuring the industry).

The foie gras industry in France has increased its efforts to structure itself within industry associations representing the interests of the industry nationally and in international trade missions. The French associations have also joined industry alliances of other foie gras-producing nations in “Euro Foie Gras,” representing the industry at the EU level. In doing so, the industry recognizes that it needs an organized structure with a coherent voice to counter the increasing influence of activist groups. Suchman (1995, p. 590) acknowledges that “centrally institutionalized sectors provide the most favorable environments for organizations that conform to prevailing standards.” The French foie gras industry conforms to the environmental and general industry-wide practices (i.e., those used in other regular or controversial industries) by adopting representatives of its interests as mediators. The main representatives of the industry associations state:

We [the industry associations and foie gras producers] meet our European counterparts in Brussels, at trade shows or during trade missions, we discuss the next moves and share insights.

(Industry Association A)

**TABLE 1** Synthetic view of interview elements

	Interviewee	Time (1st/2nd interview)	Interview mode	Interview data record	Function of interviewee
Industry associations	Industry Association A	150/40 min	Face-to-face/Phone	Recorded	Director of Communication
	Industry Association B	90/30 min	Skype/Phone	Written notes	Director
	Industry Association C	180/60 min	Face-to-face	Written notes	President
	Producer 1 (large)	20 min	Phone/Mail	Written notes	Marketing executive
	Producer 2 (large)	40/10 min	Phone/Phone	Written notes	Vice president
	Producer 3 (small/independent)	80 min	Face-to-face/Mail	Written notes	Owner
	Producer 4 (small/affiliated)	70/15 min	Face-to-face/Phone	Written notes	Owner
	Producer 5 (small/affiliated)	90/10 min	Face-to-face/Phone	Written notes	Owner
Activist Groups	Activist group 1	105 min	Skype/mail	Recorded	Responsible for foie gras
	Activist group 2	30 min	Face-to-face/mail	Written	Head of communication

... what we [industry association and foie gras farms] need to do is be transparent about foie gras production to respond to misinformation about foie gras by activists.

(Industry Association B)

Structuring the legitimation efforts through industry associations facilitates explaining foie gras production practices and disseminates information/scientific reports about animal welfare. The industry associations make an effort to establish the legitimacy of the product in new markets by preemptively explaining, promoting, and intervening to position foie gras as a taken-for-granted product that is a part of both the natural and cultural systems.

## 2. Managing legitimacy through recognition and the use of certifications, standards, and labels (strategies for enhancing recognition).

Despite efforts of activist groups to trigger a ban on the production and sale of foie gras on the grounds of animal welfare protection, much of the legislation in France aims to ensure that the ducks and geese are reared in good conditions and treated with respect. For example, new regulations about the size of breeding cages for ducks have been adopted at the EU level. To demonstrate the care given to animals and to exhibit sensitivity to the prevailing sentiment about animal welfare within the market (and thus to strengthen their legitimacy), the foie gras industry has explicitly implemented this new EU directive to ensure animal welfare. The industry also transcended basic regulatory requirements through the adoption of standards and labels, such as the case of the “Protected Geographical Indication” (PGI). The PGI was set up by the EU to protect the foie gras appellation from products produced in France that are obtained by the force-feeding of ducks under certain breeding conditions in specific geographical areas. For producers, explicitly complying with the PGI label as part of their legitimacy management is necessary to establish the recognition of their products (including the welfare of their animals) and to determine their distinctiveness to maintain a competitive advantage against the foie gras producers of other countries (which may be produced under less stringent regulations of animal welfare and, hence, may be cheaper). In sum, by establishing a seal that indicates that their foie gras is of good, traceable quality and that it has been produced under controlled circumstances, the industry is managing its legitimacy in the eyes of its proponents but also in terms of legitimacy for animal welfare. As the director of one of the industry associations emphasizes:

This label has proved its effectiveness for other products like Bayonne ham in France or Parmigiano Reggiano cheese in Italy; for us, exports have risen, and domestic sales of PGI foie gras have increased.

(Director of Industry Association A)

In 2004, the foie gras industry strived to obtain legislative acknowledgment that foie gras is a protected cultural and gastronomical heritage of France. By achieving this recognition, French foie gras production is considered compatible with the EU legislation on animal welfare through the exceptions within this legislation for cases such as foie gras, thereby guaranteeing foie gras production in France on a long-term basis. Moreover, legislative cultural and gastronomical heritage recognition establishes French foie gras as a quality legacy product, a determining factor in the international marketing of foie gras. Simultaneously, such recognition helped the industry maintain but also gain legitimacy.

## 3. Managing legitimacy through the establishment of a common identity (strategies for enhancing a common identity).

Industry associations and the vast majority of the 8,000 members that they represent recognize the increasing influence of national and international activist groups and how they influence the perceptions of consumers. In response, the industry has stepped up its communication efforts, its commitment to transparency, and improvement of the production processes.

Industry Association A explains “... we are financed partly by the foie gras firms, and we represent them. We have a budget of €5,000,000 dedicated to communication about foie gras.” Furthermore:

Until recently, many communication actions were made to counteract activist group campaigns. But given the rising influence of activist groups in the French industry and in the EU, [our association] is devising general and common communication strategies about foie gras. On behalf of the industry, we have even carried out a survey worth about €75,000 with a well-known survey firm as of July 2013 on the perceptions of foie gras by the public.

(Industry Association A)

Recognizing the damage on legitimacy inflicted by what the foie gras industry argues to be a misrepresentation of reality by its opponents, the industry boosted its efforts to better inform audiences about the production processes using a strategy that seeks to establish a common identity. The industry acknowledged that its lackluster and uncoordinated response to the challenges in the past had implications for developing existing/new markets. Moreover, the industry recognized a common identity needs to have credibility. To obtain credibility, the industry has put emphasis in obtaining the national charter, known as “Palmi G Confiance,” put in place to govern the production processes in the industry. Independent auditors were contracted to inspect production sites verifying that animals’ quality of life and rearing conditions comply with the charter.

The best way to deal with these attempts [of activist groups] to destabilize the sector is to reassure the consumer and policymakers by making the production conditions of foie gras transparent. We are working with Palmi G Confiante ... which has a 21-points checklist for welfare and quality foie gras. The interprofessional organization recruited an independent supervisory body, where 80 technicians audit farms. This is crucial for producers to prove their respect of the Charter commitments. Through this, they share a common connection and identity. Nearly 130 farms are already licensed, and this is just the beginning. This offensive and transparent tool will combat the misconceptions that are harming the industry in France and abroad.

(Industry Association B)

Common identity in this context means that the different industry actors (e.g., producers and industry associations) project themselves in a uniform and consistent manner about maintaining high standards of production and adhering to a common code of conduct in terms of production quality and animal wellbeing. This implies that when specific producers do not respect the established standards (potentially harming the ducks and geese), their behavior and conduct deviate from that of the common group. Consequently, those “bad” producers will be considered the outgroup, singled out for their inappropriate behavior. This is an attempt by the industry to be transparent in how foie gras is produced in line with established standards but also a mechanism to differentiate between the practice of foie gras production and individual cases of bad implementation of the practice. The concerted efforts to establish a common identity with credible norms and values have become key aspects of the industry’s legitimacy management.

#### 4. Managing legitimacy through interactions with public policymakers (strategies for leveraging corporate political activities).

The French foie gras industry recognizes the importance of maintaining good relations with policymakers to preserve its legitimacy by ensuring the maintenance of a favorable business environment for the production and sales of foie gras. Specifically, the industry manages its broad regulatory environment by influencing policymakers through strategies for leveraging corporate political activities (e.g., Hillman et al., 2004; Schuler et al., 2002). Corporate political activities relate to corporate attempts to shape government policy in a favorable way for the industry (Hillman et al., 2004; Katic & Hillman, 2023). The foie gras industry uses such activities to counteract legitimacy challenges by pressure groups

seeking to terminate foie gras production by ensuring that policymakers do not constrain the activity or better still protect the activity. The industry does so primarily by underscoring the cultural heritage that foie gras represents (through the cultural heritage law), the contribution that it makes to the economy through promoting economic growth and employment, as well as by pointing out the efforts made to guarantee the quality of the product and the wellbeing of the animals (through standards and labels such as the GPI label). The industry acknowledges the importance of ongoing interactions with policymakers:

This is business; you have to integrate them [public policymakers] in your relations and build a strong political capital ... tacit rules and regulations matter.

(Large Producer 1)

The VP of one of the world’s leading producers further underscores the importance of relations with policymakers:

The company has to forecast more and be very thorough about market research before investing. The business environment has changed. Negotiations with local governments are of utmost importance.

The French foie gras industry also aims to grow and succeed in international markets. To that end, it is imperative that the industry realizes that in many countries, governments remain the most influential stakeholders who control critical resources and opportunities. Hence, it is important to shape the regulatory framework to acquire and maintain legitimacy (Banerjee & Venaik, 2018). Large Producer 2 highlighted that from experience he was “aware that dealings in some markets such as China or Qatar are based on noncontractual, rather than contractual mechanisms ....” The interviewee also mentioned that dealing with foreign governments was of the utmost importance, particularly in countries with highly regulated markets. Through various corporate political activities at national, European, and international levels, industry associations leverage their political ties. *Industry Association C* stresses:

Our mission is to represent and defend the interests of the foie gras industry in every possible way, whether it is being involved in hearings about foie gras trade or talking to governments and local representatives.

Managing the relations with public policymakers through strategies for leveraging corporate political activities thus emerges as another key strategy to deal with diverging legitimacy judgments.

## 5. Managing legitimacy through denial and explaining discourses (discourse strategies).

With the emergence of social media, activist groups have become more effective in stirring controversy using visual techniques about what they argue to be cruel foie gras production methods. Shocking imagery of poorly treated animals and caricatures of force-feeding tubes used on humans feature prominently. While foie gras remains widely consumed in France (>80% of the French consume foie gras<sup>1</sup>), public concern about the impact of the production methods on animal wellbeing has been growing. While most foie gras producers do not recognize themselves in how their animals and production processes are depicted by activist groups, the producers have nevertheless been forced to repair their legitimacy by creating normalization accounts, by denying illegitimacy, or by justifying legitimacy.

*Denial accounts.* Primary and secondary data evidenced such accounts. Despite the initiatives to structure their industry and certifying products/production processes, denials of opposition appear widespread:

... it is not politically correct to talk or ask questions about activist groups within the industry ... What is important is the perception of our consumers.

(Representative of Industry Association C)

... they [activist groups] are negligible elements.

(Small independent producer 3)

... they [activist groups] are communists who do not influence my business decisions.

(Small affiliated producer 4)

*Explaining accounts.* Rather than shunning arguments and ignoring the fact that opposition to their business exists, some foie gras producers take a more offensive approach to the opponents' challenge to their legitimacy. Giving explanations about the foie gras' production methods can soften and positively influence stakeholders' perceptions. Izzy Yanay, general manager of Hudson Valley Foie Gras, provides excuses for illegitimacy claims: "Where are the terrible images coming from? Some are from industrial farms in France, where individual cages are [used to be] common." Yanay blames bad farm management in France and not the foie gras production process itself for the poor perceptions (DiGregorio, 2009). Interestingly, French foie gras producers expressed similar sentiments about the bad practices at some farms.

... a few bad breeders are not representative of all of us. Of course, in every industry, there are a few "lame ducks" (interviewee

smiles). However, most of us love our animals, they are our livelihood. So why would we ill-treat our own animals?

(Small affiliated producer 5)

Despite other common legitimation strategies, different approaches persist in the discourses that actors in the foie gras industry take to counter the challenges to their legitimacy.

## The quantitative study

We chose full-profile conjoint experiments for two reasons. Because we set out to concomitantly investigate the perceived appropriateness of legitimation strategies of the foie gras industry and evaluators' environmentalism and media skepticism, it was necessary to carry out nested analyses and to control for potentially confounding variables. Additionally, research about sensitive/controversial topics tends to be difficult to conduct due to social desirability effects. Our experimental design limited social desirability as the appropriateness of the different legitimation strategies was not self-assessed but determined by the "weight" applied to each in the different assessments (details in the sections below). Furthermore, this method allowed us to capture "real-time" evaluations rather than rely on introspection (Shepherd et al., 2013).

Conjoint analysis, an established method originally used in marketing research (Green & Srinivasan, 1990), has since been used in numerous judgment formation studies across a variety of disciplines, including entrepreneurship, political science, and strategy (Priem, 1992; Shepherd et al., 2013). Specifically, conjoint analysis like the one we use in this study has also been successfully used to investigate legitimacy evaluations (Kibler et al., 2017).

Conjoint experiments require evaluators to make judgments about a series of profiles. A profile comprises a combination of different attributes. In our study, each profile had five attributes representing each legitimation strategy. Each attribute varied by one of two levels (e.g., "High" and "Low" for "Strategies for structuring the industry"). We developed a task in which evaluators were asked to evaluate the legitimation strategies by rating how appropriate they deemed the strategies to be. Each profile conveyed information about the five strategies identified in the qualitative study (see Table 2).

To make the assessment task more manageable, we used the orthogonal fractional factorial design by Hahn & Shapiro (1966) to decrease the number of attribute level combinations to sixteen (32 with replications). We did a within-person manipulation design to capture the appropriateness assessment in response to the legitimation strategies and a post-experimental questionnaire to capture the environmental values and media skepticism of evaluators, as well as the control variables (see Table 3). We used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM 7.03) to analyze the nested data. Table 3 details the variables used.

<sup>1</sup>Source: CIFO (Comité Interprofessionnel des Palmipèdes à Foie Gras), 2018.

**TABLE 2** Example of a profile used in the conjoint experiment

Situation 3	
Industry structure	High degree of organization
Recognition	Low use of quality certification
Common identity strategy	Diffuse
Industry-policy maker relations	Proactive
Discourse strategies	Explaining
Assessment of the above description of strategies	
How appropriate do you consider the following strategies taken by the Foie Gras industry? Please circle your answer on the following scale.	
Completely inappropriate	Completely appropriate
1	2 3 4 5 6 7

Data were collected in the fall of 2016 by the first two authors from members of the public. The data collection took place in France within two large retail spaces in the cities of Bordeaux and Marseille. Participation was voluntary, and no rewards were given (Hsu et al., 2017). Respondents were instructed to consider each assessment as a separate situation, independent of all others and within the current economic environment in France. The instructions and descriptions provided common ground and held constant all other conditions for all hypothetical assessments so that respondents focused directly on the characteristics of the legitimation strategies in each profile.

We used a pen-and-paper instrument to administer the experiments and the post-experimental questionnaire. Respondents took about 30 min for the task. After removing 43 incomplete/unreliable responses, we obtained 992 decision points nested in 31 respondents. To test for order effects, we created four versions of the experiment that differed in the order of the attributes (two versions) and profiles (two versions). We found no significant order effects ( $p < 0.05$ ). Figure 1 illustrates the quantitative model.

### Dependent variable: “Appropriateness”

We asked respondents to assess the degree to which they found each legitimation strategy profile appropriate using a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at (1) *for completely inappropriate* and (7) *for completely appropriate* following the scale used by Kibler et al. (2017). Each respondent evaluated 32 profiles.

It is worthwhile to note that the reason why multi-item measures are not commonly used in full profile conjoint experiments is that each respondent is presented with a multitude of profiles requiring multiple assessments. Using multi-item measures would make the task unmanageable. Our respondents were presented with 32 profiles requiring them to make 32 assessments with each profile comprising a different mix of the five

distinct attributes that vary at two levels. Some scales that measure organizational legitimacy propose a 12-item scale (e.g., Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Elsbach, 1994), which if used in conjoint experiments would result in each respondent having to answer 384 questions (12 items  $\times$  32 profiles), not including the questions of the post-experimental questionnaire. The number of questions that respondents would have to answer to obtain reliable data would be infeasible given the time respondents would reasonably spend on the experiment and the cognitive load it would entail for respondents. Moreover, while these scales measure organizational legitimacy, our study measures the perceived appropriateness of legitimation strategies. This is different from the perceived legitimacy of the industry itself. While this could be considered as the legitimacy of legitimation strategies, other existing measures would not have accurately captured the phenomena of our interest.

### Level 1 (independent) variables

Five attributes indicate the legitimation strategies, each varying at one of two levels: (1) “strategies for structuring the industry” (low/high structuring), (2) “strategies for enhancing recognition” (low/high certifications); (3) “strategies for enhancing a common identity” (diffuse/unified); (4) “strategies for leveraging corporate political activities” (reactive/pro-active), and (5) “discourse strategies” (denial/explaining).

### Level 2 moderating variables

We used two validated scales: “environmentalism” comprising 4 statements (Shepherd et al., 2009) and “media skepticism” comprising five items (Meyer, 1988).

### Control variables

We controlled for age, gender, education, and personal judgment about foie gras and foie gras consumption. Although we inquired into respondents’ work experience in the foie gras industry, none of the respondents responded positively. We therefore left this control out of our analysis.

### Findings from the quantitative study: evaluators’ perceptions of appropriateness

Table 4 illustrates the means, SD, and correlations of Level 2 variables.<sup>2</sup> We mean-centered the independent variables and calculated the variance inflation factors

<sup>2</sup>Given the orthogonal design of our study, there is zero correlation between the Level 1 attributes (the strategies). Hence, these variables are not listed in Table 4



TABLE 3 Attributes and variables in the study

Variable	Attribute	Detail
Dependent variable	Appropriateness	How appropriate do you consider the strategies taken by the foie gras industry? (1: <i>completely inappropriate</i> ; 7: <i>completely appropriate</i> )
First-level attributes (independent variables)	Strategies for structuring the industry	<b>High:</b> The industry organizes itself through structured industry associations, which represents its interests nationally and regionally but also at the European level and in international trade missions. <i>A dedicated entity that represents the interests of all actors in the industry at national, European and international levels.</i> <b>Low:</b> The industry is not organized in a structured way, and different unrelated entities represent its interests nationally and regionally as well as at the European level and in international trade missions. <i>Each actor in the industry represents its own interests to its best ability at national, European and international levels.</i>
	Strategies for enhancing recognition	<b>High use:</b> While the foie gras is produced with respect to current regulations, it also fulfills quality standards and labels, such as GPI. These provide evidence that the product is of good and traceable quality and that it has been produced under controlled circumstances under specific breeding conditions in specific geographical areas. <i>This foie gras has been made traditionally in Southwestern France. Certified GPI. ISO quality label.</i> <b>Low use:</b> While the foie gras is produced with respect to current regulations, such as many other products, it does not seek to obtain labels and standards certifications, such as GPI (geographical protected indication). <i>This foie gras has been made traditionally in France.</i>
	Strategies for enhancing a common identity	<b>Unified:</b> All actors in the industry provide similar messages about foie gras such that the messages are coherent and unified. <i>A uniform message is most effective because it addresses generic concerns that exist about the legitimacy of our products and/or production processes.</i> <b>Diffuse:</b> The different actors provide their own messages about foie gras such that there is a variety of messages about the product. <i>Our own message is more effective to profile the quality of our products and production processes, independent of what other actors in the industry do.</i>
	Strategies for managing industry-policy maker relations	<b>Proactive:</b> Proactively lobbying and managing the legal and regulatory environments by influencing policymakers. <i>Active networking to enhance political ties.</i> <b>Reactive:</b> Case-by-case interactions with policymakers to manage legal and regulatory environments, e.g., when a scandal or crisis arises. <i>Opportunistic networking to enhance political ties.</i>
	Discourse strategies	<b>Denial:</b> Contesting that opposition to foie gras matters even if it carries out various actions against the industry or making statement such as The consequences of foie gras opposition is negligible as <i>there is already a good consumer base and there are new markets to develop in other countries. /Too many jobs are at stake for opposition to matter.</i> <b>Explaining:</b> Explaining that the bad practices of a few producers do not reflect those of all producers. Explaining that <i>gavage/force feeding occurs only the last 17 days. Being transparent about the production and opening-up to the public by allowing farm visits and educational tours. Explaining that producers are taking all measures to enhance animal welfare by proving, for example, bigger breeding spaces for the ducks and geese, better quality food etc.</i>
Second level (moderator) variables	Media skepticism (5 items)	In your opinion the media is ... (1) fair (1: <i>unfair</i> ; 7: <i>fair</i> ), (2) is biased (1: <i>unbiased</i> ; 7: <i>biased</i> ), (3) tells the whole story (1: <i>does not</i> ; 7: <i>does</i> ), (4) is accurate (1: <i>inaccurate</i> ; 7: <i>accurate</i> ), (5) can be trusted (1: <i>cannot</i> ; 7: <i>can</i> )
	Environmentalism (4 items)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural resources in our development offers (1: <i>sacrifices have to be made</i>; 7: <i>all precautions must be taken</i>)</li> <li>Production patterns and the welfare of the natural environment (1: <i>only minor changes</i>; 7: <i>substantial changes required</i>)</li> <li>People's consumption and respect for the environment (1: <i>minor changes</i>; 7: <i>substantial changes required</i>)</li> <li>The natural environment (1: <i>will look after itself</i>; 7: <i>needs vigorous protection for the benefit of future generations</i>)</li> </ul>

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Variable	Attribute	Detail
Control variables	Age	Calculated by birth year
	Gender identity	0: <i>female</i> , 1: <i>male</i>
	Education level	0: <i>no schooling</i> ; 1: <i>high school</i> ; 2: <i>technical diploma</i> ; 3: <i>bachelor</i> ; 4: <i>master</i> ; 5: <i>doctorate</i> . We calculated the average number of years of schooling for this variable to avoid ordinal effects
	Work experience in the foie gras industry	0: <i>no</i> ; 1: <i>yes</i>
	Frequency of consumption of the product	0: <i>never</i> ; 1: <i>rarely or on special occasions</i> ; 2: <i>two to three times/year</i> ; 3: <i>a few times/year (6–10) times</i> ; 4: <i>regularly (once/month)</i> ; 5: <i>very often (once/week)</i>
	Legitimacy of foie gras	1: Very low legitimacy - 7: Very high legitimacy

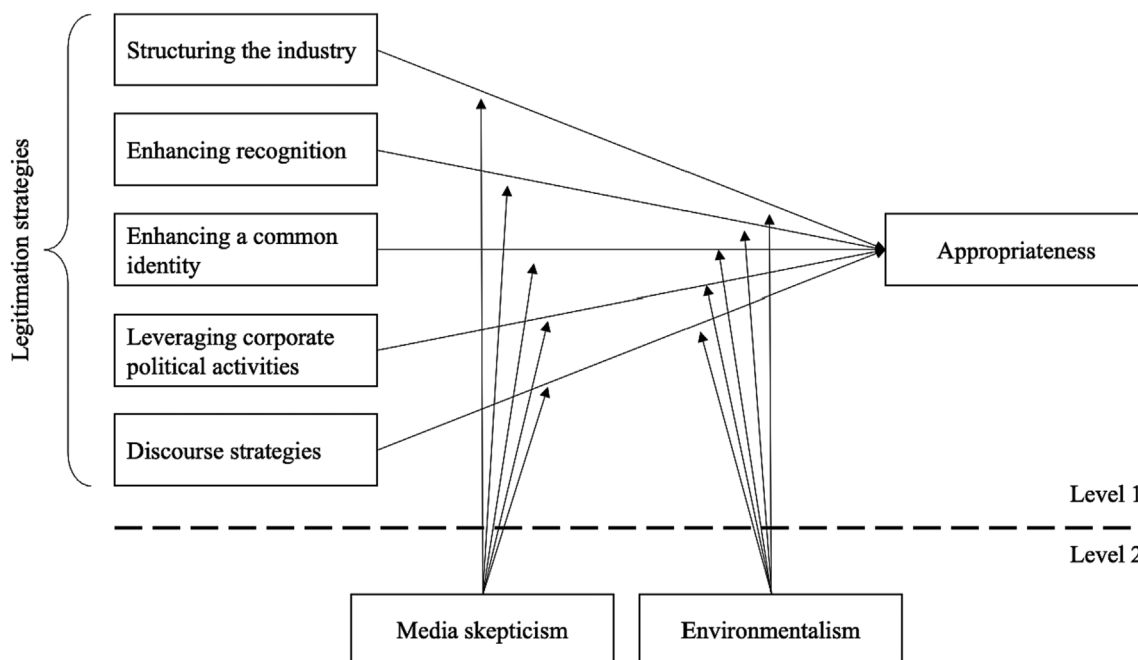


FIGURE 1 Quantitative research model

(VIF)—all below 2 showing that multicollinearity is not a problem.

Table 5 summarizes the results of the HLM analysis. First, we report the base model with the Level 1 attributes and Level 2 controls only. Second, we add the Level 2 main effects. Finally, we add the 10 two-way interactions (the full model). In all models, the average coefficients for *strategies for enhancing recognition* (1.08,  $p < 0.001$ ), *discourse strategies* (0.722,  $p < 0.001$ ), and *strategies for enhancing a common identity* (0.277,  $p < 0.001$ ) are positive and significant. The coefficient for *strategies for structuring the industry* is negative and significant ( $-1.102$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The coefficient for *strategies for leveraging corporate political activities* is not significant. Our model explains the variance in the weight assigned to the perceived appropriateness of each legitimation strategy.

The interaction coefficient between *Media skepticism* and legitimation strategies is positive and significant for *discourse strategies* (0.353,  $p < 0.01$ ) and *strategies for enhancing a common identity* (0.345,  $p < 0.01$ ). The interaction coefficient between *environmentalism* and *strategies for enhancing recognition* is positive and significant (0.114,  $p < 0.1$ ), and the coefficient is negative but significant for *strategies for structuring the industry* ( $-0.133$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ).

Figure 2a–d illustrates these interactions.

In Figure 2a, the weight assigned to *discourse strategies* on *appropriateness* increases from 3.028 to 3.766 when *media skepticism* is low and from 2.560 to 4.710 when it is high. In Figure 2b, the weight assigned to *strategies for enhancing a common identity* on *appropriateness* decreases from 3.465 to 3.329 when *media skepticism* is low but increases from 3.013 to 4.257 when *media*

TABLE 4 Correlations

Means, standard deviations, and correlations								
Variables	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	27.774	5.144						
2. Gender	0.550	0.506	0.110					
3. Average number of years of schooling	16.740	3.575	0.501	0.159				
4. Foie gras legitimacy	3.830	1.663	0.157	0.199	-0.079			
5. Frequency of consumption	0.810	0.792	0.690	-0.059	0.106	0.541*		
6. Media skepticism	0.000	1.287	0.006	-0.227	0.241	-0.320	0.154	
7. Environmentalism	0.000	0.761	0.303	0.139	0.096	-0.020	0.051	0.077

Note:  $N = 992$  decision points nested in 31 respondents.

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

TABLE 5 Results of the conjoint analysis

Results of HLM on the effects of media skepticism and environmental values						
On the weight of legitimization strategies in appropriateness assessments <sup>a</sup>						
Variables	Base model		Main effects model		Full model	
1. Intercept for overall model	3.517***	(0.12)	3.517***	(0.11)	3.516***	(0.11)
2. Structuring the industry	-1.111***	(0.08)	-1.111***	(0.08)	-1.102***	(0.07)
3. Enhancing recognition	1.089***	(0.08)	1.088***	(0.08)	1.081***	(0.08)
4. Enhancing a common identity	0.278***	(0.09)	0.277***	(0.08)	0.277***	(0.08)
5. Corporate political activities	-0.117	(0.09)	-0.117	(0.08)	-0.116	(0.08)
6. Discourse strategies	0.722***	(0.08)	0.722***	(0.08)	0.722***	(0.08)
7. Age	0.014	(0.02)	0.003	(0.03)	0.003	(0.03)
8. Gender	0.308	(0.25)	0.228	(0.25)	-0.227	(0.25)
9. Average number of years of schooling	-0.207	(0.27)	-0.055	(0.27)	-0.056	(0.27)
10. Legitimacy of foie gras	0.220*	(0.09)	0.169 <sup>†</sup>	(0.10)	0.169 <sup>†</sup>	(0.09)
11. Frequency of consumption	-0.077	(0.19)	0.006	(0.19)	0.006	(0.19)
12. Environmental values			-0.183 <sup>†</sup>	(0.11)	-0.182 <sup>†</sup>	(0.11)
13. Media skepticism			0.120	(0.16)	0.119	(0.16)
14. Media skepticism x Structuring the industry					-0.165	(0.10)
15. Media skepticism x Enhancing recognition					-0.011	(0.12)
16. Media skepticism x Enhancing a common identity					0.345**	(0.11)
17. Media skepticism x Corporate political activities					-0.143	(0.12)
18. Media skepticism x Discourse strategies					0.353**	(0.11)
19. Environmentalism x Structuring industry					-0.133 <sup>†</sup>	(0.11)
20. Environmentalism x Enhancing recognition					0.114 <sup>†</sup>	(0.07)
21. Environmentalism x Enhancing a common identity					-0.112	(0.08)
22. Environmentalism x Corporate political activities					-0.108	(0.08)
23. Environmentalism x Discourse strategies					-0.075	(0.08)

<sup>a</sup>Over and above legitimization strategies of the appropriateness judgment.

<sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ .

\* $p < 0.05$ .

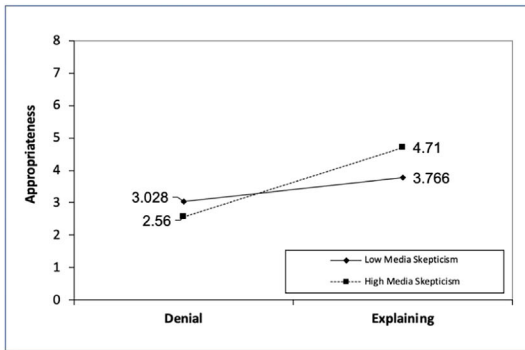
\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

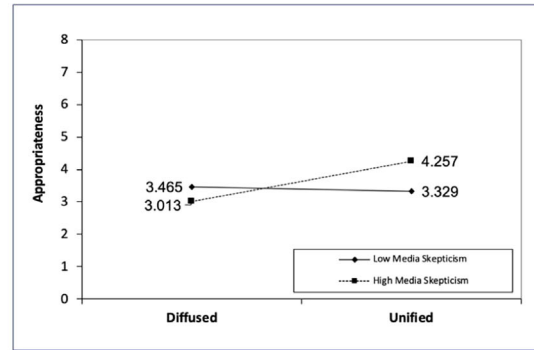
*skepticism* is high. In Figure 2c, the weight assigned to *strategies for enhancing recognition on appropriateness* increases from 2.731 to 4.665 for low *environmentalism* and from 2.139 to 4.529 for high *environmentalism*. In

Figure 2d, the weight assigned to *strategies for structuring the industry on appropriateness* decreases from 4.667 to 2.729 when *environmentalism* is low and from 4.569 to 2.099 when *environmentalism* is high. The interaction

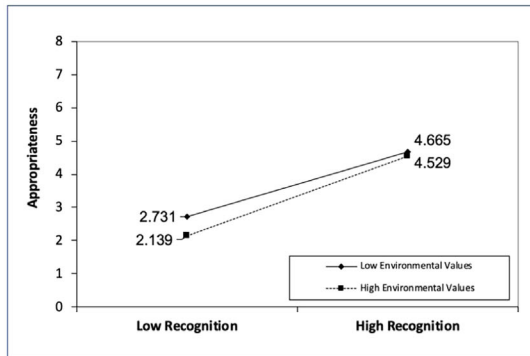
(a) Discourse strategies x Media skepticism



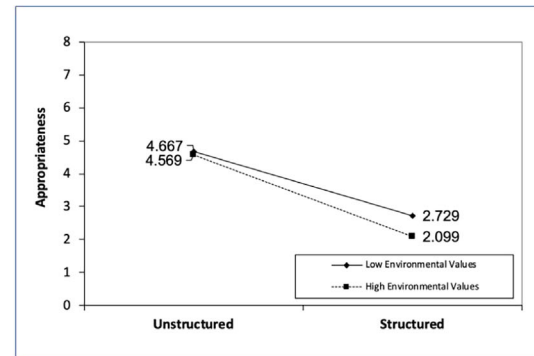
(b) Enhancing a common identity x Media skepticism



(c) Enhancing Recognition x Environmentalism



(d) Structuring the industry x Environmentalism



**FIGURE 2** (a) Discourse strategies x media skepticism. (b) Enhancing a common identity x media skepticism. (c) Enhancing recognition x environmentalism. (d) Structuring the industry x environmentalism

is negative because the higher *environmentalism*, the lower the increase in *appropriateness*. We discuss our findings and contributions below.

## DISCUSSION

Effectively managing legitimacy is fundamental for the survival of organizations, particularly when they become the target of popular challenge. Our study contributes to legitimacy literature by specifying how controversial organizations can manage their legitimation in an effective way (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2016; Du & Vieira, 2012; Hiatt & Sangchan, 2013; Reast et al., 2013). To gain, maintain, and repair legitimacy, it is imperative that scholars and practitioners recognize that legitimation constitutes a dynamic interaction between a subject of legitimacy and those who evaluate its legitimacy (Schoon, 2022; Siraz et al., 2023). Effective legitimation then cannot be limited to devising legitimation strategies but additionally requires the simultaneous consideration of how appropriate evaluators perceive these strategies. A deeper insight into the perceived appropriateness of the legitimation strategies is essential as it affects the overall legitimacy perceptions held by evaluators (Gond et al., 2016).

Our findings advance the literature on legitimation strategies by explicitly assessing perceptions of appropriateness of legitimation strategies rather than theorizing (or assuming) their outcomes. Particularly in controversial industries, the type of strategy used may provide a crucial push towards (or away from) its intended goal. Evaluators not only consider the substance of the message that is transmitted through the strategy but also the form or nature of the legitimation strategy. This is particularly problematic in controversial contexts where legitimacy is already at risk. Examples beyond the foie gras industry include companies from the tobacco, alcohol, or confectionery industries sponsoring sports teams (Yang & Goldfarb, 2015). While legitimation through sponsorship is not per se perceived as negative, for companies in these industries, it is considered inappropriate to normalize the consumption of their products in this way given the clash between sports (considered healthy) and tobacco, alcohol, or confectionery (considered unhealthy). Although we do not explicitly investigate this in our paper, it is likely that the legitimacy perceptions of the core actions, behaviors, and characteristics of an entity and the perceptions of the appropriateness of the legitimation strategies are jointly considered and coalesce into the overall legitimacy perception.

In the context of the foie gras industry, strategies relating to *structuring the industry* triggered the strongest response from evaluators, followed by *enhancing recognition*, *discourse strategies*, and *creating a common identity* respectively, whereas *strategies for leveraging corporate political activities* did not yield a significant response. *Strategies for structuring the industry* were viewed as inappropriate. Specifically, evaluators perceived a highly structured industry negatively. This observation is important, as it suggests that using such strategies could ultimately harm the legitimacy of the foie gras industry and thus contradict the intended purpose of the strategy. A possible explanation for this perception could be that the institutionalization of industry associations—in the perception of evaluators—equates to the formation of more powerful actors in the social environment. Evaluators likely fear that such actors will impose the industry's interests upon society rather than considering broader stakeholder and societal interests (Jahn & Brühl, 2018).

*Strategies for enhancing recognition* were perceived as most appropriate, followed by *discourse strategies* and *strategies for creating a common identity*. The information that evaluators use to cast their judgment is a blend of facts, perceptions, and interpretations drawn from the environment. Fostering recognition by certifications conveys that the industry can be trusted and that it conforms to good practice. The communication modes between organizations and salient stakeholders should nevertheless be congruent with the perceptions of evaluators about the legitimacy of the organizations' (Finch et al., 2015; Suchman, 1995). In the foie gras industry, better information provision, higher transparency, and the establishment of quality certifications have comforted proponents and partially addressed opponents' concerns about animal welfare.

As *discourse strategies*, denial accounts may be effective in comforting proponents, but they are less effective for undecided evaluators and delegitimizing for opponents. At best, the industry maintains legitimacy in the eyes of evaluators who have already cast a positive judgment. However, denying may backfire and cause harm to the industry (Elsbach, 1994). Indeed, explaining discourses were preferred by evaluators. Having access to information gathered by the industry helps evaluators make up their minds (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). Moreover, it demonstrates the industry's engagement with stakeholders (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Despite this, we find continued use of denial accounts and even a preference for such accounts by many actors in the foie gras industry. The rift between the strategies the industry uses and those perceived more appropriate by evaluators evidences the importance of understanding evaluators' perceptions in mitigating risks of using strategies that may harm legitimacy.

The industry strives to *enhance a common identity* that is perceived favorably by evaluators. It has been established that preserving legitimacy is best achieved by strategies that maintain identification with audiences or that

reduce evaluators' cognitive efforts by increasing their familiarity through easily identifiable characteristics that help promote the taken-for-granted quality (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Finally, we found no significant effect for *strategies for leveraging corporate political activities*. This is somewhat surprising given that research in other contexts shows that there is a generally negative perception, for example about lobbyists in France (Rival & Major, 2018). This may be because corporate political activities are more distal to evaluators who thus assign less importance to them. Yet industries experiencing legitimacy struggles are also under scrutiny by public policymakers (Doh & Guay, 2006). Unlike evaluators, public policymakers intervene to resolve social disputes. Through regulation, public policymakers act as protectors when the industry is shielded or as disruptors when constrained/banned (Kurzer & Cooper, 2007). Most countries in Europe have opted for restriction, yet some have opted for protection: France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Spain, all of which produce foie gras. Consequently, it is important for organizations to maintain activities that involve dealing with policymakers whether or not evaluators are sensitive to such efforts (Schuler et al., 2002). Our evidence indicates that the foie gras industry successfully integrates strategies for leveraging corporate political activities to maintain its legitimacy.

Our research further extends the legitimacy literature by considering the important moderating effects of evaluators' personal characteristics on the legitimation process (Finch et al., 2015). This is important given that the appropriateness of an entity and its legitimation strategy merely provides a partial understanding of the legitimation process. Specifically, it fails to consider the intrinsic characteristics of evaluators. For example, the extent to which arguments used by the fracking industry to legitimize the practice (such as energy independence or reduced energy costs) appeal to evaluators depends on their environmental values.

In the foie gras industry, the moderating effects of evaluators' *environmentalism* and *media skepticism* introduce an interesting degree of nuance to understanding legitimation processes. While evaluators generally have a positive perception of *strategies for enhancing recognition*, evaluators with high environmentalism perceive these strategies as being less appropriate than evaluators with lower environmentalism, unless the industry demonstrates a very high recognition. Thus, evaluators with high environmentalism appear more convinced of the appropriateness of the strategy when certifications are very strict or very broad. Our data do not allow us to make further inferences about which of the two (or blend) is optimal; further research should delve deeper into that. In the case of *discourse strategies*, Elsbach's (1994) observation—that denial discourses are perceived as less appropriate than explanation discourses—is amplified when evaluators express higher levels of *media skepticism*. That is, these evaluators judge denial discourses as less appropriate and

explanation discourses as more appropriate than evaluators with lower levels of *media skepticism*. Possibly when evaluators are skeptical of the media, evaluators may be more willing to accept the legitimacy arguments provided by the foie gras industry.

The effect of *media skepticism* on *strategies for creating a common identity* points towards intriguing aspects. When *media skepticism* is high, the effort to make sure that the message communicated by the industry is coherent and unified may lead to higher perceptions of appropriateness. As with *discourse strategies*, when evaluators are reluctant to trust the media, coherent and unified messages help them scrutinize the arguments for and against the foie gras industry. Conversely, incoherent and diffuse messages hinder that process or at least make it more difficult. Interestingly, when evaluators express lower levels of *media skepticism*, the opposite appears to be true. That is, unified messages are perceived as less appropriate. This may be attributable to the fact that unified messages also imply a lower variety of opinions and explanations that can be used to validate or compare legitimacy opinions that have been expressed in the media. Future research should further explore this.

Lastly, as for *strategies for structuring the industry* being deemed less appropriate, evaluators with high environmentalism express a stronger negative reaction than evaluators with lower environmentalism. The envisioned implications of the industry organizing itself to become more unified and hence a more powerful actor in the social environment may lead evaluators with higher environmentalism to view the industry as less constrained in respecting environmental standards. Consequently, these evaluators likely perceive the industry as less legitimate.

In sum, actors in the foie gras industry should be cautious in devising legitimization strategies. Not only should they gage the perceived appropriateness of such strategies but they should also consider evaluators' personal characteristics in relation to the industry's core activity.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study, though in-depth and inclusive of the contributions from the stakeholders on both sides of the controversy, relates to the foie gras industry in France. Nevertheless, our findings contribute to a better understanding of the implications of using different legitimization strategies in a controversial sector. Because the extent and nature of legitimacy and legitimization strategies in controversial industries likely vary by industry, organization, and country, the specific legitimization strategies identified in our empirical context, as well as evaluators' perceived appropriateness of those strategies may be different in other settings. For example, legitimization in an industry that is facing moral or religious controversy might find differences in approach and outcomes.

Thus, detailed research on the legitimization strategies in other industries and/or countries is needed to shed further light on the more generic legitimacy struggles of controversial organizations.

Moreover, insights from the above findings could pave the way for the design of comparative studies to further investigate evaluators' perceptions of legitimization strategies. A design comprising controversial organizations from different industries would allow for the examination of commonalities and differences on a larger scale (e.g., organizations operating in energy production, genetically engineered agriculture, medical research, adult entertainment, pharmaceutical, and the tobacco or alcohol industries). Lastly, interesting prospects for future research exist in further exploration of the moderating effects that other values have on the perceptions of the appropriateness of legitimization strategies in the eyes of different types of evaluating audiences (e.g., investors, policymakers, employees, or activists).

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