Legitimacy and transparency in the fashion industry

An empirical research into the legitimacy profiles of more transparent and less transparent fashion brands as perceived by consumers

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Bachelor Thesis

28 June 2019

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Word count: 6774

Universiteit Utrecht

Summary

Today's fashion industry is highly controversial due to its environmental as well as social impact. Accordingly, consumers are developing an increasingly critical attitude towards fashion brands' practices. This makes it hard for fashion brands to gain legitimacy, which refers to the way in which an organization is perceived of by society and is important for firm survival. As a result, firms are constantly trying to become more legitimate. From the literature, it has become evident that transparency has the potential to contribute to a legitimate status. Thus far, the link between legitimacy and transparency has never been empirically proven. Therefore, the aim of this research is to answer the following research question: *How and why does legitimacy as perceived by potential consumers vary for more transparent and less transparent fashion brands?*

To be able to do this, 2 more transparent brands (Esprit and H&M) and 2 less transparent brands (Urban Outfitters and Mango) were selected. Moreover, 20 potential Dutch consumers that are familiar with these 4 brands were selected via purposive sampling. To measure the levels of legitimacy of the brands, 9 legitimacy concepts from the legitimacy framework of Suchman (1995) were operationalized in a semi-structured interview. This interview was conducted among the participants and the transcripts were analyzed in Nvivo, using both theory based as well as open codes. Also, a 5-point scale was developed that allows for scoring the various forms of legitimacy based on the answers of the interviewees.

Data analysis revealed 5 factors that determine levels of legitimacy: transparency, product price, appearance, feeling and firm size. Moreover, final legitimacy scores for the brands could be calculated. Overall, H&M has the highest score (34), followed by Urban Outfitters (31) and Esprit (31) and finally Mango (28). This ranking does not consistently correspond to the transparency categories to which the brands belong. The major reason for this seems to be that consumers are not aware of levels of transparency and accordingly, of efforts brands put in sustainability. However, they do explicitly say that transparency does have the potential to affect the way they evaluate a brand, which is why it was also identified as a legitimacy determinant. Taking this into account, it seems like fashion brands should create more awareness about their transparency levels and sustainability initiatives, if they are willing to use transparency as a tool to become more legitimate.

The major limitation of this research is that it was assumed that all of Suchman's 9 legitimacy forms do contribute to overall legitimacy of the brands to the same extent. It is not clear whether this is justified or not. Another limitation is sample size, both with regard to the number of fashion brands as well as the number of consumers. Also, the composition of the sample of interviewees forms a limitation. Future research should work on these issues. Moreover, other countries and other stakeholders from the fashion industry could be involved as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the link between transparency and legitimacy.

Samenvatting

De hedendaagse kledingindustrie is zeer controversieel vanwege de impact die de industrie heeft op mens en milieu. In lijn hiermee ontwikkelen consumenten een steeds kritischere houding tegenover de praktijken van kledingmerken. Dit maakt het moeilijk voor kledingmerken om legitimiteit te verkrijgen. Legitimiteit verwijst naar de manier waarop een organisatie wordt waargenomen door de samenleving en is een belangrijke voorwaarde voor het voortbestaan van een bedrijf. Daarom proberen bedrijven continu hun legitimiteit te vergroten. Uit de literatuur blijkt dat transparantie de potentie heeft om bij te dragen aan een legitieme status. Tot nu toe is het verband tussen legitimiteit en transparantie nooit empirisch bewezen. Het doel van dit onderzoek is dan ook om de volgende onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden: *Hoe en waarom verschilt legitimiteit zoals waargenomen door potentiële consumenten voor transparantere en minder transparante kledingmerken?*

Om dat te kunnen doen, werden 2 transparantere merken (Esprit en H&M) en 2 minder transparante merken (Urban Outfitters en Mango) geselecteerd. Bovendien werden 20 potentiële Nederlandse consumenten die bekend zijn met deze merken geselecteerd door middel van een doelgerichte steekproef. Om de mate van legitimiteit van de merken te meten, werden 9 legitimiteitsconcepten uit het legitimiteitsraamwerk van Suchman (1995) geoperationaliseerd in een semi-gestructureerd interview. Dit interview werd afgenomen onder de participanten en de transcripten werden geanalyseerd in Nvivo, waarbij van zowel op Suchmans theorie gebaseerde codes als van open codes gebruik werd gemaakt. Ook werd een 5-puntsschaal ontwikkeld die het mogelijk maakte om de verschillende vormen van legitimiteit te scoren op basis van de antwoorden van de participanten.

Data-analyse leidde tot identificatie van 5 factoren die mate van legitimiteit bepalen: transparantie, productprijs, uitstraling, gevoel en bedrijfsgrootte. Bovendien konden de totale legitimiteitscores voor de merken berekend worden. Over het geheel gezien heeft H&M de hoogste score (34), gevolgd door Urban Outfitters (31) en Esprit (31) en uiteindelijk Mango (28). Deze ranking komt niet consequent overeen met de transparantiecategorieën waartoe de merken behoren. De belangrijkste reden hiervoor lijkt te zijn dat consumenten zich niet bewust zijn van de niveaus van transparantie en dus ook niet van de inspanningen die merken leveren op het gebied van duurzaamheid. Ze zeggen echter expliciet dat transparantie wel degelijk de potentie heeft om de manier waarop ze een bedrijf evalueren te beïnvloeden en daarom is transparantie ook geïdentificeerd als legitimiteitsdeterminant. Het lijkt er dus op dat kledingmerken meer bewustzijn moeten creëren over hun transparantie en duurzaamheidsinitiatieven, als ze transparantie daadwerkelijk als middel willen gebruiken om hun legitimiteit te vergroten.

De voornaamste limitatie van dit onderzoek is dat werd aangenomen dat alle 9 legitimiteitsvormen die Suchman (1995) onderscheidt in dezelfde mate bijdragen aan de totale legitimiteit van de merken. Het is niet duidelijk of dat terecht is of niet. Een andere beperking is de steekproefgrootte van zowel kledingmerken als consumenten. Ook de samenstelling van de steekproef van participanten vormt een beperking. Toekomstig onderzoek zou aan deze problemen kunnen werken. Bovendien kunnen andere landen en andere belanghebbenden uit de kledingindustrie worden betrokken om uitgebreider inzicht te verkrijgen in het verband tussen transparantie en legitimiteit.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary fashion industry is controversial in many respects. Not only does the industry pose threats to the environment, the social costs are high as well (Księżak, 2016; White, Nielsen, & Valentini, 2017). For instance, resources are wasted, water is polluted and working conditions are poor at several different stages of the fashion supply chain (Bick, Halsey, & Ekenga, 2018). As a result, it is a challenge for fashion brands to gain legitimacy. Legitimacy is associated with the different ways an organization is perceived of by society and plays a major role for firm survival (Hooghiemstra, 2000; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). This is why firms put all kinds of efforts in the quest for a more legitimate status.

During this quest, organizations need to improve stakeholders' perception of them. In the case of fashion brands, one way of doing this is by publicly disclosing information about their sustainability issues and initiatives (Reilly & Larya, 2018). Put differently: by becoming more transparent. Transparency can be achieved by the disclosure of information about practices, decisions and procedures within an organization (De Fine Licht, Naurin, Esaiasson, & Gilljam, 2011). It refers to the degree to which organizations engage in such disclosure and is related to their openness to stakeholders. From the literature, it has become evident that transparency has the potential of generating legitimacy (De Fine Licht et al., 2011). However, according to Lock and Schulz-Knappe (2019) communicating more does not necessarily lead to more perceived transparency and trustworthiness. As a result, the difficulty for fashion brands to gain legitimacy might increase, since consumers question their actual sustainability efforts (Hutchins, Sinha, & Nandan, 2019; Ma, Lee, & Goerlitz, 2016).

In other words: the link between transparency and legitimacy is complex (De Fine Licht et al., 2011). Moreover, a gap in the literature exists with regard to this link. Due to the difficulty of measuring legitimacy empirical studies are scarce in this area (Díez-Martín, Prado-Roman, & Blanco-González, 2013). Also, the link between credibly disclosing information and increased legitimacy has never really been proven empirically (Lock & Schulz-Knappe, 2019). It remains unclear how companies can most effectively and understandably communicate sustainability practices (Arrigo, 2018) in order to be perceived as legitimate (Hutchins et al., 2019). Therefore, it is exactly this link between transparency and legitimacy that this research attempts to investigate. It will do so from a consumers' perspective, as consumers are becoming more and more aware of the status quo of the fashion industry. In line with this, they are developing an increasingly critical attitude towards fashion brands (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013) and accordingly, might impede gaining legitimacy. The legitimacy-transparency link will be investigated by means of the following research question: *How and why does legitimacy as perceived by potential consumers vary for more transparent and less transparent fashion brands?*

To be able to answer this question, 20 potential Dutch consumers will be interviewed about how they perceive 4 fashion brands that were ranked in the Fashion Transparency Index 2019. This index is published by Fashion Revolution, a global movement that is committed to radically changing today's fashion industry (Fashion Revolution, n.d. – a). They strive for safe, clean and fair fashion production. In the Fashion Transparency Index, fashion brands are ranked according to their disclosure of information about among other things their suppliers and their social and environmental impact (Fashion Revolution, n.d. – b). The ranking will be used to be able to compare the levels of transparency of fashion brands with their perceived legitimacy as follows from the interviews. In order to do this, relatively low ranked brands will be compared with relatively high ranked brands. Based on this comparison it will become clear how transparency and legitimacy are related in the fashion industry.

This insight could be of practical relevance for apparel brands. As stated before, it currently is a challenge for fashion brands to retain and maintain legitimacy. Meanwhile, more and more organizations from all over the world strive to become legitimately sustainable (Hutchins et al., 2019). Having this status could for example provide a competitive advantage that might contribute to a company's success. Taking this into consideration, this research could guide fashion brands in making decisions about disclosure of their sustainability initiatives and their social and environmental impact as a means to increase their legitimacy.

The structure of this research is as follows. First, a theoretical framework will be established, which gives an overview of specific forms of legitimacy and their meaning, based on Suchman's (1995) legitimacy framework. Then, the used method will be explained, including a description of the sample selection, data collection and data analysis. The section after that discusses the results, leading to a discussion and conclusion in which the research question will be answered.

2. Theoretical framework

According to Hutchins et al. (2019) legitimacy has the potential to stimulate a company's success within the industry. Legitimate companies are perceived as being more predictable, trustworthy and meaningful. In contrast, companies that are granted lower levels of legitimacy, are often confronted with negative associations and are considered to be of less value than more legitimate organizations. They are not perceived as adapting to and fitting into the system of the society they are part of and therefore, the continuation of their existence cannot be guaranteed (Fernando & Lawrence, 2014). To get a grasp of what is needed for an organization to become more legitimate, it is necessary to gain a more in-depth understanding of what legitimacy exactly entails.

Suchman's legitimacy framework

In his extensive research into the management of legitimacy by organizations, Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as follows: "Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." This means that legitimacy concerns a subjective evaluation that is not based on individual events or individual observers. On the contrary, it addresses a course of events and is created by a collective audience that either approves or disapproves of the behavior of an organization. In line with this definition, legitimacy can be considered as a theoretical means that contributes to a better understanding of the normative and cognitive forces that affect organizations. As such, it provides a specific link between society and organizations (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975).

Even though in the literature many definitions of legitimacy are proposed (e.g. Aldrich & Fiol, 1994), using Suchman's (1995) legitimacy framework seems most appropriate for this research. Compared to other typologies of the concept, his framework is considered to be one of the most influential (Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack, 2017). Moreover, he subdivides the concept into 3 categories that are subdived in different forms themselves as well, leading to rather specific definitions. These concrete forms are supposed to lend themselves better for operationalization than larger, abstract forms that others propose. His subcategorization of legitimacy and the meanings of the subcategories are as follows:

1. *Pragmatic legitimacy* is based on the self-interest of an organization's immediate audience. Organizations' behavior is evaluated based on how this audience is directly affected by its activities. Pragmatic legitimacy itself can be subdivided into three types.

   i. When it comes to *exchange legitimacy*, approval or disapproval depends on the expected value an organization creates for its audience. In other words, in this case legitimacy depends on the kind of exchanges an organization provides that directly benefit the audience.

   ii. *Influence legitimacy* is related to the responsiveness of an organization to its audience's interests. In practice, this means that organizations conform to standards set by its audience. An indicator of influence legitimacy is the extent to which an organization is willing to give its audience a sort of authoritative function – albeit a limited one. Exhibiting such responsiveness is very important for gaining pragmatic legitimacy.

iii. *Dispositional legitimacy* is derived from the occurrence of 'personification' of organizations. Organizations are usually depicted as autonomous and morally responsible, which is why audiences generally respond to them as if they were individuals. Accordingly, they assign them a certain character and this assignment is essential for the evaluation of the organization. Positive characteristics could namely enhance the overall legitimacy of an organization.

2. *Moral legitimacy* concerns a normative evaluation of an organization. Here, self-interest of the audience is of less importance than is the case with pragmatic legitimacy. What matters more, is whether an organization increases societal welfare or not and whether an organization does what is considered to be 'right'. This assessment is again based on the socially constructed value system. Even though society takes a central position here, judgements about societal welfare are often not separated from evaluators' own personal interests. Moral legitimacy can appear in four different forms.

i. *Consequential legitimacy* means that the achievements and effectiveness of organizations serve as a tool to evaluate an organization. The quality and value of the output an organization delivers to consumers determines in what way the organization is rewarded or not. This quality and value are socially defined.

ii. *Procedural legitimacy* focuses on the procedures through which the achievements and effectiveness of an organization are realized. In order to gain moral legitimacy, these procedures should be in accordance with the socially constructed value system. This is especially urgent when outcomes are not easily visible or not easy to measure.

iii. *Structural legitimacy* is related to whether organizations are considered to be the 'right' organizations to perform certain work and that they do so in a socially accepted way. This is not so much based on the objective capacities or competence of organizations, but more on an evaluation of their socially constructed organizational identity.

iv. *Personal legitimacy* regards the charisma of individual organizational leaders. This form of moral legitimacy is not as stable as the previous ones, as those leaders can be easily and quickly replaced. However, they can still have a significant impact on how an organization is perceived.

3. The third form of legitimacy is *cognitive legitimacy*. Whereas interest and evaluation are key for pragmatic and moral legitimacy, here, cognition and knowledge play a major role. In this respect, two forms of cognitive legitimacy can be distinguished.

    i. The first form is based on *comprehensibility*. In order to become legitimate, organizations should make sure that the actions they perform are understandable for their audiences. This means that their actions should fit in the socially constructed value system while at the same time make sense in the light of the experiences of audiences in their daily lives. As a result, it becomes easier for these audiences to explain the endeavors of organizations.

    ii. Secondly, *taken-for-grantedness* can form the basis for cognitive legitimacy. In that case, organizations transform products, processes or services into 'givens' that are then taken for granted. This renders alternative situations without these givens unthinkable, even though the evaluators do not necessarily support them. Taken-for-grantedness therefore is a very powerful source of legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994), but it is a huge challenge to obtain and is not easy to control.

An overview of the different forms of legitimacy and their meanings is presented in the table below.

Table 1

Summary of the 9 forms of legitimacy based on Suchman (1995)

Form of legitimacy	Sub-form of legitimacy	Meaning
Pragmatic legitimacy	Exchange legitimacy	An organization creates the value that its audience expects it to create for them personally
	Influence legitimacy	An organization responds to its audience's interests and conforms to the standards set by this audience
	Dispositional legitimacy	An organization is personified and is attributed positive characteristics
Moral legitimacy	Consequential legitimacy	The socially defined quality and value of the output of an organization are sufficient
	Procedural legitimacy	The procedures of an organization are in line with the socially constructed value system
	Structural legitimacy	An organization is considered to be the right one for the tasks it performs
	Personal legitimacy	The leader of an organization is charismatic
Cognitive legitimacy	Comprehensibility based legitimacy	The actions that an organization performs are understandable for its audience
	Taken-for-grantedness based legitimacy	The existence or practices of an organization are taken for granted

3.   Method

To be able to answer the research question, the levels of legitimacy that are attributed to more transparent and less transparent brands by consumers should be measured and explained. In order to do this, appropriate samples of fashion brands and consumers were selected. Moreover, the theoretical concepts were operationalized in the form of an interview guide, which was used for collecting the needed data. Afterwards, the interviews were analyzed, leading to an overview of the legitimacy profiles of the selected brands as well as explanations for these profiles.

3.1 Sample selection

For this research 4 fashion brands were selected from the Fashion Transparency Index 2019. The Fashion Transparency Index assesses information disclosure of a very broad range of both social as well as environmental aspects of the production and distribution chain of a brand. Five key areas represent those different aspects and are classified as follows: Policy & Commitments, Governance, Traceability, Know, Show & Fix and Spotlight Issues (Fashion Revolution, 2019). In the overall analysis, brands are ranked based on how much information they disclose about the specific topics that belong to one of the five key areas. The more information they disclose; the more points they receive per area. The ranking is expressed in percentages, with the lowest possible score category being 0-10% and the highest possible score category being 81-100%. This ranking of brands thus corresponds to different levels of transparency.

For the sample selection, two brands that were ranked in a relatively low category and two brands that were ranked in a relatively high category were selected. In 2019, no brand scored higher than 64%, so the highest category in this case is the category of 61-70% transparency. The distinction between high ranked and low ranked was made to be able to compare transparent brands with brands that seem to lack transparency. Besides, the most important conditions for the sample selection were that the selected brands have stores in The Netherlands and that the average Dutch consumer knows the brand. Also, the price category to which the brands belong should be similar, so the comparison of the brands is more or less even in this respect. Taking this into consideration, 4 brands with the following levels of transparency were selected:

Table 2

Overview of the selected fashion brands and their respective levels of transparency in percentages

Low ranked	High ranked
Mango (18%)	Esprit (62%)
Urban Outfitters (5%)	H&M (61%)

When it comes to the sampling of interviewees, purposive sampling was used to select 20 potential Dutch consumers that are familiar with the 4 brands. According to Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) in qualitative research, the sample should be large enough to achieve theoretical saturation, while its size also should allow for in-depth analysis. It is supposed that interviewing 20 consumers meets these requirements and leads to a sufficient amount of data that enables to answer the research question. The interviewees were numbered 1 to 20 and a table with a general demographic description of each interviewee can be found in Appendix 1.

3.2 Data collection

To empirically investigate the levels of legitimacy of the different brands, semi-structured interviews were conducted among the 20 selected consumers. A set of fixed questions guaranteed that all forms of legitimacy were covered during the interview. At the same time, the way in which interviewees formulated their answers was flexible and they were not constrained by sets of given answer options. In contrast to questionnaires, interviews therefore have the potential to gain detailed insight into the interviewees' points of view (Bryman, 2012). With regard to the complex nature of legitimacy in all its forms and its respective perception by consumers, this is of utmost importance for this research. Interviews also allow the researcher to find out what the interviewees consider most important and relevant concerning the topic. Furthermore, new questions that arise during the interview can be asked in order to get a full understanding of the motivations and reasons behind the answers interviewees give. All in all, this will result in a qualitative, in-depth analysis of the legitimacy of fashion brands as perceived by potential consumers.

The interview guide consisted of two parts. Part I included some general questions about fashion brands. Part II addressed legitimacy and for each form of legitimacy, one or more questions were formulated. In order to strengthen the internal validity of this research, these questions stay as close to the theoretical meanings of the concepts as possible. Accordingly, the questions should measure to what extent the interviewees attribute the various forms of legitimacy to the different fashion brands. For this purpose, all questions of Part II were asked about each brand separately. In this part of the interview guide, there were also some (indirect) questions included about sustainability and transparency issues. The full interview guide and the operationalization of each form of legitimacy can be found in Appendix 2. The operationalization of personal legitimacy deviates somewhat from the theory, as the CEOs of fashion brands are usually not widely known. Therefore in this research personal legitimacy will be related to (famous) people interviewees associate with a brand, that potentially influence their perception of it.

Due to the relative difficulty of measuring legitimacy, a pilot interview was conducted before the 20 interviews were conducted that were used for data analysis. First of all, this pilot interview made clear whether the proposed questions were understandable for the interviewees. Some questions turned out to be too vague or too hard to answer and these were changed before the final interviews were conducted. Also, the pilot interview showed whether the proposed questions really resulted in answers that could be tracked back to the different forms of legitimacy. If this was not the case, these questions were revised as well. Consequently, the internal validity of the research was strengthened even more.

Beforehand, all participants were verbally informed about the context in which this research was carried out. Also, each of them gave permission for their interview to be recorded, as to be able to transcribe it afterwards. All respondents could ask questions at any stage before, during and after the interviews. Finally, their anonymity was guaranteed so their quotations are presented anonymously.

3.3 Data analysis

To analyze the conducted interviews, NVivo was used. First, transcripts were made of each interview and these were uploaded in the program. In order to code the data, nodes were established to categorize the content of the transcripts (Bryman, 2012). These nodes corresponded to the 9 legitimacy concepts. As it is possible to create hierarchically organized nodes, the three forms of legitimacy and their sub-forms could be clearly separated. Using the theory as the basis for data categorization should enhance the external reliability of this research. Having established the nodes, the content of the transcripts was then coded according to the types of legitimacy they cover, based on Suchman's definitions. Afterwards, specific parts of the transcripts that include information on certain legitimacy forms could be easily found back via the nodes.

This information was used to make descriptions of each form of legitimacy per brand. These descriptions include the quotes and numbers of interviewees that are most relevant and/or striking for the specific forms of legitimacy. The descriptions per brand can be found in Appendix 3. Using these descriptions to accurately measure levels of legitimacy is no easy task. Many researchers have underlined the difficulty of measuring legitimacy (Díez-Martín et al., 2013). Previous research into legitimacy that used semi-structured interviews as well, did not come up with a tool or measure to express levels of legitimacy in a specific value (e.g. Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Human & Provan, 2000). As the aim of this research is to compare legitimacy levels, a scale is proposed that makes it possible to attribute the brands legitimacy scores, which allow for comparison. This concerns a five-point scale and based on the sets of answers of the interviewees and their argumentation that are summarized in Appendix 3, all legitimacy forms were assigned

1, 2, 3, 4 or 5, leading to a detailed legitimacy profile of each brand. The table below shows what these scores roughly entail.

Table 3

Values of the legitimacy scores 1-5

Legitimacy score	Value
1	Relatively low level of legitimacy
2	Low to medium level of legitimacy
3	Medium level of legitimacy
4	Medium to high level of legitimacy
5	Relatively high level of legitimacy

The legitimacy assessment of the brands was also carried out by two peers in order to increase the internal reliability of the research. They scored the 9 legitimacy forms per brand based on the theoretical framework and the descriptions of each form of legitimacy. Their attributed scores were compared with those of the researcher and the latter were reconsidered when significant differences occurred. The inter-rater reliability turned out to be very high: the overall scores attributed by the three raters differed by a maximum of 2. With 2 exceptions, the separate scores per legitimacy form were also very similar. Afterwards, the final separate scores per legitimacy form were taken together to calculate an overall score for each brand.

Besides this theoretical approach of the data, open coding was used as well in order to signal patterns that could explain similarities and differences between levels of legitimacy and other important trends in the data. This means that when the occurrence of a certain topic was considered to be important or became particularly salient, a new node was established and all transcripts were (re-)analyzed to include related statements. Eventually, based on these nodes it became clear how levels of legitimacy can be (partially) explained.

4. Results

In this section, the results of the data collection and analysis are presented. First, an overview of factors that could determine legitimacy is given. Secondly, the legitimacy profiles and their scores will be compared. Finally, the scores are related to the levels of transparency of the brands.

4.1 Legitimacy determinants

Analysis of the interviews led to identification of 5 major legitimacy determinants: transparency, product price, appearance, feeling and brand size. In Figure 1, the numbers of interviewees that mentioned the different determinants are presented.
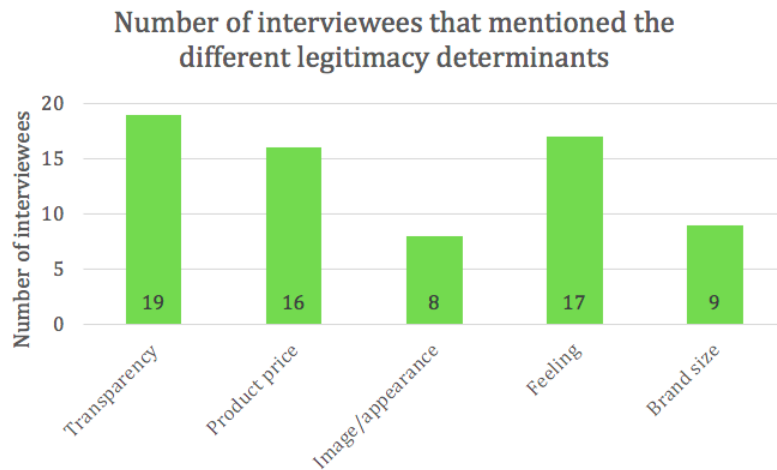
Figure 1. Number of interviewees that mentioned the different legitimacy determinants

First of all, 19 interviewees link transparency to legitimacy, both in a negative and positive way. High transparency could negatively influence legitimacy, as interviewee 7 states when discussing Urban Outfitters: 'If they now become extra transparent and it turns out that children made it, that will have a negative effect.' In contrast, high transparency could also contribute to legitimacy. For example, interviewee 3 argues: 'If a company announces they are doing well, this will have a positive effect.'

On the one hand, low transparency can be positive. As interviewee 14 puts it: 'Ignorance is a bliss.' When people are not informed about (un)sustainable practices, they do not judge a brand based on it. However, low transparency makes it hard for interviewees to understand the activities of a brand. Interviewee 13 says about Esprit: 'besides selling products, I do not know what else they're doing, so I can't understand it either.' Moreover, if brands are believed to disclose little information about sustainable development, consumers tend to think they are not involved in sustainability initiatives. For example, when discussing Esprit, interviewee 4 says: 'I never heard of it, so then I do not think so.'

Moreover, 16 interviewees consider *product price* as an indicator for legitimacy. 14 of them assume that if clothes are more expensive, production processes are 'sustainable' and 'better'. Interviewee 15 explains this for Esprit: 'Because it is a bit more expensive than the average, you sooner expect that more attention is paid to sustainability and for example working conditions […].' At the same time, 8 interviewees relate cheap clothes to 'less sustainable', 'bad' practices. For instance, interviewee 7 explains: 'Because they have cheap clothes and I don't necessarily associate that with sustainable.'

Thirdly, 8 consumers indicate the *appearance* of a brand influences how they perceive it. Interviewee 10 believes the production processes of Esprit are acceptable based on the fact that the brand comes across as 'friendly, soft' and 'natural'. Moreover, interviewee 2 links the 'old-

fashioned appearance' of Esprit to acting 'according to the rules' when it comes to sustainability issues.

Fourthly, 17 interviewees base their statements on a certain *feeling* they have about the brand, either positive or negative. These statements are thus not based on factual brand knowledge. 13 interviewees described a good feeling about one of the brands; 2 experience a negative feeling. For example, interviewee 6 says: 'My feeling tells me it is a good company that is willing to invest in sustainability.'

Finally, *firm size* is of influence. 6 interviewees associate large scale firms with harmful effects for society. For instance, interviewee 5 thinks that in this case chances are products are produced under 'worse conditions'. 3 other interviewees mention that smaller companies are presumably 'better'. In contrast, interviewee 20 assumes that since H&M is a large firm, they might have more means to act sustainably.

An overview of the 5 determinants is given in the table below.

Table 4

Legitimacy determinants and their potential effect(s) on legitimacy

Legitimacy determinant	Potential effect of determinant on legitimacy	
Transparency	High transparency could either negatively or positively affect perceived legitimacy	
	Low transparency could either negatively or positively affect perceived legitimacy	
Product price	Higher prices tend to be associated with more legitimate practices	
	Lower prices tend to be associated with less legitimate practices.	
Image/appearance	Depending on the specific image/appearance of a brand, perceived legitimacy could either be enhanced or decreased	
Feeling	Feelings about a brand can either lead to increased or decreased perceived legitimacy	
Brand size	Larger firms are associated with less legitimate practices	
	Smaller firms are associated with more legitimate practices	

These determinants explain differences between the legitimacy scores that were attributed to the 4 brands.

4.2 Comparison of the legitimacy profiles

Based on the legitimacy descriptions in Appendix 3, the 4 brands were scored as follows:

Table 5

Overview of the legitimacy scores of each fashion brand

Form of legitimacy	low transparency		high transparency	
	Urban Outfitters	Mango	H&M	Esprit
Exchange legitimacy	4	3	5	4
Influence legitimacy	5	5	5	5
Dispositional legitimacy	1	1	3	3
Consequential legitimacy	4	3	3	4
Procedural legitimacy	3	3	2	3
Structural legitimacy	4	4	3	3
Personal legitimacy	3	1	4	1
Comprehensibility based legitimacy	4	4	4	5
Taken-for-grantedness based legitimacy	3	4	5	3
Overall legitimacy score	**31**	**28**	**34**	**31**

This table shows that levels of all 9 forms of legitimacy vary in many ways for the fashion brands. The most important differences and similarities will be discussed and will be substantiated with the highlights from Appendix 3. More in-depth explanations can be found there as well.

H&M scores highest on exchange legitimacy, because consumers can find there what they expect. Interviewee 17 describes shopping at H&M as follows: 'You know exactly what you need, you walk into H&M, know where to find it and buy is.' Mango scores lowest in this category, because 5 interviewees consider their prices too high for the value they create. Interviewee 2 states: 'Mango is more expensive than what they are worth.'

On influence legitimacy, all brands score high, meaning they respond well to their audiences' interest. First of all, interviewee 18 says about Urban Outfitters: 'They know exactly who they want to address and they reach them as well.' Besides, Mango also adapts their style and prices to its target group, as is explained by interviewee 10: 'they address people who just got into a job and who do not want to spend a lot of money on expensive suits.' Also Esprit successfully responds to its audience, as interviewee 16 illustrates: 'I think they have their own customers who always go there and are content with it.' Finally, interviewee 18 says that H&M 'knows very well what people want'.

The less transparent brands score lower on dispositional legitimacy than the more transparent brands. This could be explained by the appearance the latter have. For instance, interviewee 1 contends that Esprit 'comes across as a trustworthy brand.' Moreover, interviewee 6 states that 'Esprit comes across as a sweet company.' In addition, when discussing H&M

interviewee 6 refers to the 'trustworthiness, the good will that the company has built up over many years.'

Mango and H&M score lowest on consequential legitimacy since they do not meet quality standards of 7 and 11 interviewees respectively. Moreover, 4 interviewees consider the additional value of Mango for society modest. Interviewee 1 arguments for this as follows: 'it does not have something that makes it very special.' In contrast, according to interviewee 4 the output of Urban Outfitters is valuable because: 'They have a certain style that you will not find in other stores.' Also, 12 interviewees consider the quality of their clothes to be good. Finally, Esprit scores higher because among other things interviewee 13 and 14 agree that Esprit 'does well', for example by 'being sustainable'.

No brand scores high on procedural legitimacy, because interviewees suspect the practices of most fashion brands are not very sustainable. For both Urban Outfitters as well as Mango, 11 interviewees think their processes and procedures are acceptable. For Esprit, 10 interviewees believe this is the case. H&M deviates with one point from the other brands, which can be related to the fact that 12 of the interviewees think their processes and procedures are unacceptable. The reasoning behind this is nicely summarized by interviewee 13, when she talks about characteristics of the production process of H&M: 'in low-wage countries, […] for a very low hourly wage and under poor conditions, in an unsustainable way.'

For structural legitimacy scores are similar; the more transparent brands seem to score a bit lower because interviewees assign them a sustainability task which they currently do not perform. For example, interviewee 11 says Esprit should 'constantly look for alternative raw materials, and improve the situation for their employees.' This is not a task Esprit currently explicitly seems to perform, but something they should work on in the long run, according to interviewee 11, 14, 17 and 18.

Mango and Esprit score low on personal legitimacy simply because interviewees do not associate any person with these brands that could influence their perception. H&M scores highest here, because 7 interviewees associate it with either Doutzen Kroes or David Beckham. 5 of them indicate this has a positive influence. Interviewee 14 and 16 explain this based on the assumption these famous people would not collaborate with a 'shady brand.'

Comprehensibility based legitimacy scores are high for all brands. Mango and Urban Outfitters score lower because 2 interviewees per brand indicate they lack knowledge to fully understand their activities. For instance, about Mango interviewee 12 states she does not understand what the brand does 'due to lack of information.' Esprit excels because 4 interviewees link their prices to their apparent sustainability efforts, like interviewee 2 contends: 'If they are sustainable, I understand they are more expensive.'

Finally, Urban Outfitters scores lower on taken-for-grantedness based legitimacy because 7 interviewees mention that it is relatively new in The Netherlands. Moreover, interviewee 4 says that Urban Outfitters 'is not as deeply embedded in society as H&M.' Esprit scores lower as well, because 13 interviewees consider Esprit to be replaceable. H&M scores 5 as all interviewees think many people know H&M, which is further explained by interviewee 10, who describes the brand as a 'cultural concept.'

Taking all of this into account, H&M has the highest overall legitimacy score. Mango scores lowest and Urban Outfitters and Esprit both have a final score of 31. Like holds for most differences, these differences between the overall scores do not seem to be consistently bound to the transparency categories to which the brands belong. After all, the most transparent and the least transparent brand have the same final score. This can be related to an interesting pattern that was found when it comes to the awareness of transparency among consumers.

4.3 Transparency and sustainability awareness

From the interviews, it has become clear that people are aware of levels of transparency to a very limited extent. There is three major findings that indicate this.

First of all, regardless of the brand, consumers know extremely little about how, where and by whom clothes are made. For all brands holds that none of the consumers have much knowledge about this. It is limited to what the labels in garments tell. Interviewee 16 for example states about H&M: 'I do often look in the label because I'm curious where it was made.' Apart from countries, interviewees did not come up with any more factual information about the production chain of the brands.

Secondly, consumers have hardly any idea what the brands do with regard to sustainable development. For both Esprit and Mango not one consumer knows how the brands do (or do not) put efforts in sustainability. Interviewee 9 refers to the second hand department of Urban Outfitters as an example of a sustainability initiative. When it comes to H&M, 6 interviewees mention their conscious clothing line and/or their recycling campaign. However, their knowledge still is really superficial with regard to these initiatives. For instance, interviewee 8 states about the conscious line: 'I think it is organic cotton, or actually I don't know what it is, I don't know whether it is better for the workers.' About the recycling, interviewee 9 states: 'It is unclear what they do with these clothes.'

Finally, consumers barely came in contact with information related to sustainable development that was publicly disclosed by fashion brands. About Esprit, none of the interviewees has ever read something. Interviewee 2 and 5 mention Instagram as a channel via which they were informed about sustainability of Urban Outfitters. However, they describe this

more like advertisements than more formal announcements about sustainability initiatives. Only one interviewee (18) seems to have read something in this direction about Mango. He informed himself about their sustainable label: 'Mainly things on the website, those labels, I read a bit about what they meant exactly.' Finally, only interviewee 10 read something similar about H&M: 'a blog-like part of their website, where they put things about their newest sustainability projects.'

Overall, these findings indicate that consumers do not distinguish between the fashion brands based on their levels of transparency. In line with this, the relatively high level of transparency of Esprit and H&M does not seem to be reflected in consumers' knowledge of these brands.

5. Discussion

The results suggest that in practice, the transparency of fashion brands does not directly affect the evaluation of the brands and their respective forms of legitimacy. The major reason for this seems to be that consumers are not aware of the varying levels of transparency of the brands and the efforts they put in sustainable development. Legitimacy is therefore mainly determined by factors that are more observable for consumers, like product price, appearance, feeling and firm size. Still, the interviews reveal that from a consumers' perspective, increased transparency does have the potential of impacting legitimacy.

Based on the results, the potential effects of all determinants on legitimacy can be related to the concepts of Suchman's theoretical framework. In other words: this research reveals a set of factors that influence some of the legitimacy forms that contribute to the overall legitimacy of an organization. For example, procedural legitimacy can be affected by product price, appearance of a brand, firm size and transparency, as they determine whether consumers think production processes are acceptable and/or sustainable or not. Moreover, product price can influence exchange legitimacy, because consumers base on this whether a brand creates the expected value for them or not. Price can also contribute to consequential legitimacy as this plays a role for the quality of products and the value a brand adds to society. Furthermore, appearance is related to dispositional legitimacy and can stimulate consumers to talk about a brand in the form of human characteristics. Besides, firm size can affect structural legitimacy as this can determine whether consumers think a brand is suitable for performing a certain task or not. Also, transparency influences comprehensibility based legitimacy as knowing what is going on can be considered as a condition for understanding what is going on. Finally, feeling seems to play a role in the overall perception consumers have of a brand, be it positive or negative. As such, a certain feeling could unconsciously influence the more specific forms of legitimacy.

The potential effects of transparency require some further evaluation as the focus of this research is on the link between transparency and legitimacy. It turns out that the potential

influences of transparency that consumers indicate are in line with the theoretical mechanisms De Fine Licht et al. (2011) propose that describe the interaction between transparency and legitimacy. This holds for both the positive and negative effects. For example, increased transparency could decrease legitimacy if consumers are disappointed with what is revealed. Similarly, other mechanisms that De Fine Licht et al. (2011) describe are confirmed by the empirical findings of this research as well.

Taking the transparency effects and the effects of the other determinants into account, Suchman's framework seems to have been appropriate for measuring and explaining levels of legitimacy. Based on his framework, a scale could be developed that allows for scoring levels of legitimacy. As previous research that used interviews to map levels of legitimacy did not come up with such a tool, this research forms a valuable contribution to the existing literature on legitimacy and future research into the concept.

However, Suchman's theoretical framework does not clarify to what extent the different forms of legitimacy contribute to the overall legitimacy of an organization. This could therefore not be taken into account and can be considered as a major limitation of this research. While developing the scale to score the forms of legitimacy, it was assumed that the contribution of each form is similar. Further research should investigate more in depth whether this can be justified or not, as to be able to establish more accurate legitimacy profiles.

Another limitation of this research is the size of the sample. In order for the conclusions to be more well-grounded, a larger number of potential consumers should be interviewed. The same holds for the number of fashion brands that was included in the study. Moreover, as Urban Outfitters came to The Netherlands quite recently and is focused on a young audience, older generations generally do not know it (well). Therefore, the interviewees are all relatively young. The choice for this brand should be reconsidered in future research to be able to select a more varied sample. Moreover, it could be interesting to interview other stakeholders of the fashion industry and investigate their perception of fashion brands and levels of transparency and legitimacy. Finally, the same study could be conducted in other countries, as the perception of brands probably varies between countries and cultures due to different norms and values.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate how and why levels of legitimacy as perceived by consumers vary for more transparent and less transparent fashion brands. The results indicate that levels of legitimacy do vary between brands: H&M has the highest overall legitimacy score, followed by Urban Outfitters and Esprit and finally Mango. However, this ranking cannot be consistently led back to the transparency categories and the link between legitimacy and transparency seems limited. It is suggested that lack of awareness among consumers of different

levels of transparency of brands as well as of the efforts they put in sustainable development is related to this. However, transparency does have the potential to influence legitimacy, as interviewees repeatedly mention. Especially procedural and comprehensibility based legitimacy could be affected here. In addition to the potential influence of transparency, price, appearance, feeling and firm size also play a role in how consumers perceive fashion brands. Some of these determinants influence overall legitimacy; others influence specific forms of legitimacy that Suchman (1995) describes. Overall, this research provides new, empirical insights into how legitimacy of less transparent and more transparent fashion brands is established by consumers. As such, it forms a contribution to the gap in the literature with regard to the link between transparency and legitimacy. In addition, the findings of this study could guide fashion brands in strategically using transparency in their quest for legitimacy. Creating increased awareness about transparency and sustainability issues and efforts seems to be key here. Only then can fashion brands actively use transparency as a tool to gain a more legitimate status.

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Appendix 1 – Demographic information about the interviewees

Table 1

General demographic information about the interviewees

Interviewee number	Age	Gender	Education	Place of birth
0	21	Female	2nd year of university	Oss
1	20	Female	3rd year of university	Huizen
2	20	Female	3rd year of university	Enschede
3	21	Female	2nd year of university	Doorn
4	21	Female	2nd year of university	Den Bosch
5	20	Female	2nd year of university	Amsterdam
6	21	Female	3rd year of university	Arnhem
7	21	Female	3rd year of university	Vlodrop
8	20	Female	2nd year of university	Den Haag
9	22	Female	3rd year of university	Amsterdam
10	21	Female	3rd year of university of applied sciences	Bruchem
11	21	Female	2nd year of university of applied sciences	Den Haag
12	21	Female	3rd year of university	Leiden
13	22	Female	3rd year of university of applied sciences	Hilversum
14	20	Female	2nd year of university	Hoorn
15	21	Female	2nd year of university	Den Bosch
16	23	Male	3rd year of university	Amsterdam
17	22	Male	4th year of university	Amsterdam
18	21	Male	4th year of university	Lith
19	20	Male	2nd year of university	Tilburg
20	21	Male	4th year of university	Bilthoven

Appendix 2 – Interview Guide

<div align="center">INTERVIEW GUIDE</div>

PART I **Non-brand specific:**

1. When you decide to buy a piece of clothing, what is usually your motivation? What factors do you take into account? Why?

2. Do you find it important that brands are sustainable? For instance, that they reduce their water usage and pollution and/or improve working conditions for their employees? Why (not)?

3. Do you find it important that brands are open about how employees are treated and how they impact the environment? Why (not)?

PART II **Brand specific:** Esprit, H&M, Mango, Urban Outfitters

4. Dispositional/exchange legitimacy How would you describe brand x?

5. Exchange legitimacy Why do/would you buy clothes at brand x? Explain.

6. Influence legitimacy Does what brand x sells meet your expectations? Do you usually find what you want? And does this live up to your standards? Explain.

7. Taken-for-grantedness legitimacy Do you think many people know this brand? What is the reason for that? What if it stopped existing? Would people miss it?

8. Personal legitimacy Is there a specific (famous) person you associate with this brand? What influence does this have on how you think of the brand? Positive/negative?

9. Consequential legitimacy Do you think brand x benefits or harms society? In what way(s)? Put differently: is it considered as good (or bad) for the environment and for people? Why (not)?

10. Do you have the idea that you know how the clothes brand x sells are made, where they come from and who makes them?

11. (How) do you think brand x puts efforts in sustainable development? For example, recycling, reducing emissions and pollution, fight against child labor, enhances diversity within the organization? Why do you think so/how do you know this? → Have you ever read or seen something related to sustainable development and brand x? Where? In advertisements? In stores? On websites? Social media?

12. Dispositional legitimacy Do you think brand x stands out with regard to their sustainability efforts? Does it have a sustainable image?

13. Procedural legitimacy Do you think you would accept the production processes of brand x? Why would you/why wouldn't you? Do you take [this] into account how the clothes you buy at brand x were produced or who produced them?

14. **Structural legitimacy** What do you consider to be the job of brand x? Is brand x the right organization to perform this job?

15. **Comprehensibility legitimacy** Would you say you understand what brand x does? And when it comes to sustainability? How?

16. Taking all what has been discussed into account, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix 3 – Legitimacy profiles

Here, the 9 forms of legitimacy are described for each fashion brand, based on numbers and quotations. These descriptions were used to score all forms of legitimacy according to the 5-point scale that was designed. The scores per brand are presented in a table at the end of each brand description. These scores were used to compare the legitimacy levels of the brands in the Results section (4.2).

Urban Outfitters

Pragmatic legitimacy
Exchange The general expectation of Urban Outfitters is that is sells 'hip' fashion items: 12 interviewees mention this. Interviewee 11 for example states: 'My expectation is that they have the nicest hippest style and they do.' Furthermore, another 12 interviewees describe the clothes Urban Outfitters sells as 'eccentric' and/or 'alternative'. This is in line with what they expect. However, 14 interviewees contend that they find the products (very/too) expensive. About the high prices, interviewee 6 says: 'You would expect that it is affordable, but it is one of the most expensive stores to walk into.'

Influence 13 interviewees agree that Urban Outfitters is aimed at a specific target group of hipster, young people. They do this in a successful way. For instance, interviewee 17 states:

> 'They understand it well when it comes to their target audience. They understand where the real interests lie, how great the need of the target group is to be hip. They pick up on that well and do something with it.'

Interviewee 18 supports this view: 'They know exactly who they want to address and they reach them as well.' Put differently, Urban Outfitters seems to respond to its audience's interests and conforms to their standards.

Dispositional This form of legitimacy does not directly seem to apply to Urban Outfitters, because none of the interviewees attributed one or more positive human characteristics to the brand.

Moral legitimacy
Consequential According to interviewee 4, the output of Urban Outfitters is valuable because 'they have a certain style that you will not find in other stores.' Interviewees 13 and 19 have similar thoughts. Besides, 12 interviewees consider the quality of the clothes Urban Outfitters sells as good. On top of this, 5 interviewees think Urban Outfitters benefits society because they are sustainable. However, interviewee 8, 9 and 19 disagree with this: they believe the production and consumption of the clothes of Urban Outfitters is harmful for people and/or the environment.

<u>Procedural</u> 11 of the interviewees think the procedures and processes of Urban Outfitters are acceptable. For example interviewee 7 expects Urban Outfitters put efforts in environmental sustainability and she does not expect child labor. Interviewee 20 argues as follows:

> 'If you sell clothes for not extremely low prices and the quality of the products is good and you have not heard in the media that it is bad, then I come to the conclusion that those processes are acceptable.'

Interviewee 2, 6, 8 and 12 also consider the higher prices as a reason why their procedures are presumably acceptable. However, other interviewees (e.g. 11 and 19) believe that instead of focusing on sustainability issues Urban Outfitters mostly focusses on 'profit marges' and 'fashion items'. According to interviewee 11 this leads to procedures that are 'morally not good', in the sense that they are polluting.

<u>Structural</u> Most interviewees (e.g. 4, 8, 9, 11 and 12) describe the job of Urban Outfitters to sell eccentric, hip clothes that are in line with the latest trends. Moreover, interviewee 18 says that Urban Outfitters 'determines what is fashion'. Interviewee 12 agrees with this. About these tasks, interviewee 14 states: 'They have introduced it, that is why it suits them.' Also 8 other interviewees think Urban Outfitters performs this task well. Additionally, interviewee 13 states that Urban Outfitters turns out to be sustainable it is their job 'to let this know to the rest of the world and take the lead there.'

<u>Personal</u> 17 interviewees do not associate Urban Outfitters with a certain (famous) person. However, both interviewee 6 and interviewee 9 mention Dutch rapper Ronnie Flex. Interviewee 9 thinks this is because she links the clothes of Urban Outfitters with the music industry. Interviewee 17 mentions Justin Bieber. In all cases, interviewees state this association has a positive influence on how they perceive the brand.

Cognitive legitimacy
<u>Comprehensibility</u> 16 interviewees indicate that to a certain extent, they understand what Urban Outfitters does. Interviewee 11 explains their activities as follows: 'I think they do what they do because it is popular to do.' As an example, she adds that Urban Outfitters is active on social media. Interviewee 16 thinks this is also the reason why Urban Outfitters would put effort in sustainable development: '[...] it is very hip to do.' Moreover, interviewee 3 understands why Urban Outfitters tries to be a trendsetter: 'They want to be ahead of other companies, so that their business flourishes.' However, interviewee 2 and 9 admit that since their knowledge of what the brand does is limited, their understanding is limited too.

<u>Taken-for-grantedness</u> Interviewee 17 says about Urban Outfitters: 'among younger people, it really is a concept.' 12 other interviewees also think it is especially popular among a younger audience. In addition, 7 interviewees mention the fact that Urban Outfitters is relatively new in The Netherlands. Interviewee 6 thinks that consequently, Urban Outfitters 'is not yet a really established name.' Similarly, interviewee 4 says that Urban Outfitters 'is not as deeply embedded in society as H&M.'

Table 1

Legitimacy scores for Urban Outfitters

Form of legitimacy	Score
Exchange legitimacy	4
Influence legitimacy	5
Dispositional legitimacy	1
Consequential legitimacy	4
Procedural legitimacy	3
Structural legitimacy	4
Personal legitimacy	3
Comprehensibility based legitimacy	4
Taken-for-grantedness based legitimacy	3
Overall score	**31**

Mango

Pragmatic legitimacy

Exchange 11 interviewees expect the clothes Mango sells to be chic and another 6 state their clothing is supposed to be for more special occasions. This image people have, corresponds to what Mango offers. Interviewee 4 explains: 'their clothing is just like how they present themselves.' However, 5 interviewees explicitly mention their prices are too high. For instance, interviewee 2 states: 'Mango is more expensive than what they are worth.' Moreover, interviewee 10 and 13 think their offer is rather limited, which is why they do not always find what they are looking for.

Influence Interviewee 2, 6, 10 and 16 think Mango has a specific audience. In interviewee's 6 words: 'young women who are just starting to work.' Mango responds well to their demand for smart clothing. Interviewee 10 elaborates on this as follows: 'they address people who just got into a job and who do not want to spend a lot of money on expensive suits.' More generally speaking, as becomes clear from the description of exchange legitimacy, Mango is aimed at consumers that look for chic and special clothing, which they manage to provide.

Dispositional Mango has predominantly been described in terms of clothing related characteristics; interviewees do not seem to (morally) respond to the brand as if it was an individual.

Moral legitimacy

Consequential On the one hand, interviewee 17 states about Mango: 'it makes dressing neatly accessible for people.' Interviewees 11 and 19 agree with this. On the other hand, interviewee 1, 3, 5 and 8 think the additional value of Mango for society is modest. For instance, interviewee 1 says the reason for this is as follows: 'it does not have something that makes is very special.' Moreover, Mango's output does not consistently meet customers' quality standards. 9 interviewees find the quality sufficient; 7 are less satisfied with it.

Procedural Interviewee 8 and 20 believe the procedures and processes are unacceptable, because they read or heard this is the case. Interviewee 20 explains: 'I once read that the labor process of Mango leaves something to be desired.' 4 other interviewees can relate to this and interviewee 11 describes Mango as 'polluting', 'unsustainable' and 'unfair'. Still, 11 interviewees

assume that Mango's procedures are (more or less) acceptable. Interviewee 16 for example argues that he thinks there are good arrangements when it comes to balance between men and women within the company.

Structural 9 interviewees believe that Mango's major job is to sell clothes and that they do this well. Interviewee 9 adds: 'I do not have the idea that there is more behind this.' Also interviewee 6 states about this commercial perspective: 'That is more a personal goal than a higher purpose.' In this respect, interviewee 19 suggests Mango could maybe 'initiate a sustainable transition, by acting in a sustainably and socially acceptable way.' Among others, interviewee 1 agrees with this.

Personal Interviewees did not come up with famous persons they associate with the brand that could have an influence on how they perceive it.

Cognitive legitimacy
Comprehensibility 17 interviewees indicate that in general, they understand what Mango does. Mostly, these interviewees reason like interviewee 8: 'they simply want to produce clothes for the lowest possible price so they can get as much as possible out of it themselves.' However, interviewee 10 and 12 underline that they cannot understand Mango's activities due to 'lack of information.'

Taken-for-grantedness 15 interviewees think many people know Mango. Interviewee 9 illustrates: 'I think it is more represented in the streets.' At the same time, 11 interviewees think Mango's products can be easily replaced by products of similar brands. Also, interviewee 4 states that 'it is not as deeply rooted [in society] as H&M.'

Taking into account the interview findings, the following scores were attributed to the 9 forms of legitimacy:

Table 2
Legitimacy scores for Mango

Form of legitimacy	Score
Exchange legitimacy	3
Influence legitimacy	5
Dispositional legitimacy	1
Consequential legitimacy	3
Procedural legitimacy	3
Structural legitimacy	4
Personal legitimacy	1
Comprehensibility based legitimacy	4
Taken-for-grantedness based legitimacy	4
Overall score	**28**

Esprit

Pragmatic legitimacy
Exchange The products Esprit sells are predominantly expected to be basic and casual. In this respect, 6 consumers find the prices a bit too high. At the same time, for example interviewee 9

and 12 state that they expect the clothes last longer and among others interviewees 7, 9, 12 and 14 think the quality of the clothes is good. This makes their prices more acceptable in return. Overall, Esprit seems to live up to the expectations it raises. Like interviewee 7 puts it: 'what I expect there is what I encounter.'

Influence Interviewees tend to agree that Esprit has a somewhat 'older target audience' (e.g. 2, 5, 11, 13, 15). Interviewee 16 thinks Esprit responds well to the interests of this audience: 'I think they have their own customers who always go there and are content with it.' In line with this, interviewee 9 says: 'They try to address a certain group of people.' Interviewee 2 suspects Esprit does this by sticking to how they have always been, because 'many people find that very pleasant.'

Dispositional In general, consumers talk about Brand 3 in terms of the type of clothes they sell, taking into account style, price and target audience (e.g. 2, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14). Less often, but still to a significant extent, they assign Esprit positive human characteristics and do personify the brand. For instance, interviewee 1 contends that Esprit 'comes across as a trustworthy brand.' Moreover, interviewee 6 states that 'Esprit comes across as a sweet company.'

Moral legitimacy
Consequential When it comes to the output Esprit generates, interviewee 10 states: 'They have clothes of very good quality, stores are neat and tidy, I have never heard something negative about Esprit.' Also interviewee 11 and 12 consider the output Esprit delivers sufficient, because they 'sell clothes that last longer'. In this respect, interviewee 4 and 15 too think Esprit has a positive impact on society. Interviewee 13 and 14 add up to this that Esprit 'does well', for example by 'being sustainable'. However, interviewee 8 and 9 agree that any fashion brand 'harms society to some extent' in the process of producing clothes, decreasing the value of their products.

Procedural 10 interviewees think the procedures and processes of Esprit are acceptable. Interviewee 10 bases her acceptance on 'the appearance of the whole brand, friendly, soft'. Interviewee 1 thinks 'that the practices behind the scenes are not so lurid.' However, interviewee 9 believes that Esprit acts based on laws and guidelines only to a minimum extent. Finally, interviewee 8 states: 'I think no fashion brand has an acceptable production chain.' Also interviewee 11, 17, and 19 suspect processes are unacceptable.

Structural According to 13 of the interviewees, the principal job of Esprit is to produce and sell clothes of good quality. More specifically, interviewee 2, 5, 16, 18 and 19 believe Esprit has the task to dress an 'older', 'middle-aged' audience. Among others, interviewee 5, 13 and 15 agree Esprit is the right organization for these tasks. 12 interviewees recognize that Esprit also has a certain societal and sustainability responsibility. For example, interviewee 11 says Esprit should 'constantly look for alternative raw materials, and improve the situation for their employees.' This is not a task Esprit currently explicitly seems to perform, but something they should work on in the long run, according to interviewee 11, 14, 17 and 18.

Personal This form of legitimacy seems completely absent for Esprit. None of the interviewees associates Esprit with a famous person or ambassador that could influence their perception of the brand.

Cognitive legitimacy

Comprehensibility From a commercial point of view, 16 interviewees indicate they understand what Esprit does. Interviewee 3 explains this as follows: 'Esprit is mostly focused on their own company, on profit and growth.' Moreover, interviewee 9 understands that Esprit chooses a certain market segment to specialize in and interviewee 2 suggests that this results in 'regular customers'. In terms of sustainability interviewee 2 also says: 'If they are sustainable, I understand they are more expensive.' Interviewee 4, 7 and 14 can relate to this as well.

Taken-for-grantedness About Esprit, interviewee 14 says: 'I cannot imagine that people do not know Esprit.' Interviewee 7 states: 'it feels like they have been existing for a long time.' In contrast, interviewee 10 says: 'I think Esprit used to be well-known, and that it is now fading a bit.' In line with this, interviewee 6 admits: 'I forgot it existed.' Moreover, 13 interviewees contend they think Esprit can be easily replaced by other brands. Interviewee 10 states: 'It is no indispensable brand.'

Table 3
Legitimacy scores for Esprit

Form of legitimacy	Score
Exchange legitimacy	4
Influence legitimacy	5
Dispositional legitimacy	3
Consequential legitimacy	4
Procedural legitimacy	3
Structural legitimacy	3
Personal legitimacy	1
Comprehensibility based legitimacy	5
Taken-for-grantedness based legitimacy	3
Overall score	**31**

H&M

Pragmatic legitimacy

Exchange The most prominent expectation is that H&M's clothes are cheap: all interviewees mention this. Also, 6 interviewees expect items that correspond to the latest trends and another 5 expect large and diverse collections. 6 interviewees value the fact that it is 'easy' to shop at H&M. Taking these expectations into account, interviewee 11 states about H&M: 'You can always find there everything you need.' And interviewee 17 describes shopping at H&M as follows: 'You know exactly what you need, you walk into H&M, know where to find it and buy is.' In other words, H&M creates the value customers expect.

Influence 9 interviewees underline that H&M serves a broad range of customers. Interviewee 18 says that H&M 'knows very well what people want'. Also interviewee 13 thinks that H&M 'cleverly responds to the market.' Interviewee 2 explains they do this by offering 'something for everyone'. As such, they serve the interests of their audience.

Dispositional Interviewee 6 refers to the 'trustworthiness, the good will that the company has built up over many years.' In addition, interviewee 15 states: 'Also because it is such a large company, I think it is your duty to participate in the sustainability trend.' Interviewee 2 and 4 as

well attribute H&M this responsibility. Other interviewees tend not to assign H&M dispositional legitimacy.

Moral legitimacy
Consequential 13 interviewees agree that H&M mostly adds value to society because it provides affordable clothes for a large group of people. As interviewee 11 puts it: 'I think they make a lot of people happy with selling nice and hip clothes for little money and making this accessible for a large audience.' However, 11 interviewees find the quality of H&M's products insufficient. Also, in sustainability terms, 12 interviewees suspect H&M harms society. Interviewee 12 explains this as follows: 'H&M responds to people's greed. [...] People buy unnecessary amounts of clothes and that is bad for the world.'

Procedural 12 consumers do not think that the procedures and processes of H&M are acceptable. The reasoning behind this is nicely summarized by interviewee 13, when she talks about characteristics of H&M's production process: 'in low-wage countries, [...] for a very low hourly wage and under poor conditions, in an unsustainable way.' Yet, among others interviewee 12 believes these processes are more acceptable than before: 'I think they try to be sustainable for the world and their employees.' Interviewee 10, 15 and 20 have comparable thoughts.

Structural 8 interviewees consider producing and selling a wide range of clothes for a large public and for an affordable price as H&M's main task. About this, interviewee 16 says: 'This works for both parties: consumers and themselves.' However, interviewee 19 contends that H&M 'will become less and less suitable if they do not start acting more sustainably.' Accordingly, 10 interviewees believe H&M should set an example with regard to sustainability and should create awareness among consumers. Interviewee 11 argues for this as follows: 'They have so many resources to do that.' Interviewee 2, 7, 14 and 15 reason similarly for why H&M is the right organization to do this.

Personal 5 interviewees associate H&M with Doutzen Kroes. Another 2 mention David Beckham. Interviewee 8 and 11 say this does not change their opinion about H&M. The other ones describe a positive influence. For example, interviewee 2 finds David Beckham 'cool'. Moreover, interviewee 14 and 16 think these famous people would not collaborate with a 'shady brand' and in this respect, it positively influences their view.

Cognitive legitimacy
Comprehensibility 17 interviewees indicate they more or less understand what H&M does. Interviewee 3 explains: 'I understand making profit and having and remaining a big name.' Also, interviewee 18 says: 'I understand that they maintain a certain fashion idea and fast fashion.' On the other hand, 5 interviewees indicate they do not understand what H&M does in sustainability terms. Interviewee 12 argues: 'No, I do not understand that, because they don't make the world sustainable at all.'

Taken-for-grantedness All interviewees think many people know H&M. From their answers, it becomes clear H&M is deeply rooted in society. For instance, interviewee 10 and 13 describe H&M as 'a cultural concept'. Moreover, interviewee 3 and 4 agree that nothing compares to H&M. Finally, interviewee 2 says: 'it is almost like Coca Cola. Everywhere people know it.'

Table 4

Legitimacy scores for H&M

Form of legitimacy	Score
Exchange legitimacy	5
Influence legitimacy	5
Dispositional legitimacy	3
Consequential legitimacy	3
Procedural legitimacy	2
Structural legitimacy	3
Personal legitimacy	4
Comprehensibility based legitimacy	4
Taken-for-grantedness based legitimacy	5
Overall score	**34**