

BUILDING THE LEGITIMACY OF AN ENTERPRISE BASED ON SYMBOLS – CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM

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Purpose: The intentional use of symbols when preparing messages to stakeholders of modern enterprises could influence texts to become either more powerful or more vague. The purpose of the conducted analysis was to establish what the conditions need to be met for statements being prepared by enterprises to be the source of symbolic values that next could actually impact activities performed by them.

Design/methodology/approach: The character of the research problem inclined the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach involving literature review of disciplines, including management science as well as sociology and psychology.

Findings: In a highly uncertain conditions of the environment of modern enterprises activities performed by enterprises can be possibly interpreted in many ways. Traditional approach to communicating with stakeholders, which is believed to be based mainly on the presentation of financial data, appears to be too modest to convey effectively the message related to enterprises goals and aspirations. When enriching the descriptive part of their messages in statements of the enterprises, managers can create the context for interpretation aiming at encouraging all stakeholders to more effort being put into daily activities of their enterprises. The arguments presented in the article encourage to recognize symbols and symbolic management as cognitively interesting both in terms of scientific research and actions undertaken by company management boards in practice.

Originality/value: When using symbols in their texts in a way leading these symbols to interacting with issues important from the point of view of stakeholders, managers can make stakeholders be sure about the activities undertaken by enterprises. However, only the appropriate use of these interactions, i.e. allowing for the creation of appropriate symbolic values, is to make enterprises actually follow declarations claimed by managers. Otherwise in the long term perspective the stakeholders' trust can be weakened, which can threaten the existence of the enterprise in a contemporary, highly uncertain environment. Hence, the attention paid to the intentional use of symbolic values appears to be not only original but primarily interesting topic for the future research. It may be emphasized that the originality of the presented concept lies in its interdisciplinary assumptions that are to more accurately address the complexity of the challenges facing modern enterprises.

Keywords: agency, legitimacy, symbolic management, CEO letter.

Category of the paper: conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

Increasing globalisation and economic development triggered other processes which resulted in increasingly blunt demands for multinational enterprises (MNEs) to take responsibility for their environmental and social impacts while disclosing their non-financial risks to a greater extent. It is equal to growing expectations of CSR activities undertaken by corporations. Simultaneously, the demands placed on corporations by law are increasing (Berger-Walliser, Scott, 2018). It is significant since CSR can also be used as a tool for “pulling the wool over the eyes.” As Beets and Beets (2019) note, the reasons for activities undertaken by corporations, even if they appear to be obvious, may not necessarily be like that (e.g. corporate subsidies to universities may be dependent on the inclusion of specific authors and textbooks in the courses conducted). Furthermore, CSR initiatives may be a result of a reflection and reaction to the institutional environment of the enterprise rather than a result of a thoughtful and voluntary decision taken by the corporation (Matten, Moon, 2008; Yan, 2020).

In the light of the above challenges, there is an issue of communicating the activities of enterprises in a way that allows for legitimacy management involving gaining and/or maintaining and/or repairing legitimacy. In this paper, legitimacy management is understood as a strategic process whose paramount objective is, through learning, to improve legitimate work activities in a way that does not cause the objection of the environment. On the one hand, such communication should reflect the activities actually undertaken or planned. On the other hand, at least in certain cases, it will aim more at shaping the audience’s perception of the activities rather than informing about them and influencing them. The process of corporate communication through the tools used by the Management Board in annual reports appears to be especially relevant here. These reports (management board reports and financial statements, especially fragments placed before audited financial statements including important reviews - primarily CEO letters), alongside e.g., CSR reports or press releases and websites, are accounted means of communication with external audiences (Merkel-Davies, Brennan, 2017). With regard to those parts that open annual reports, it is outright stated that they can be regarded as legitimacy builders, in which CEOs can strive to strengthen the audience’s confidence in the enterprise or convince the audience to its excellence and future survival (Jonäll, Rimmel, 2010). The discourse led by CEOs interacts with ethical values within enterprises, and can, as a result, contribute to avoiding problematic situations (García-Ortega et al., 2019, p. 2). In this sense, the influence of the reports can be considered in terms of both message-level and process-level impacts, respectively. However, it should be kept in mind that CEO messages may not represent the current situation of the company in an appropriate manner, which implies, *inter alia*, in the case of sustainability reports, the need for stronger supervisory standards (Na et al., 2020). On the other hand, the significance of messages from CEOs stems from the fact that the quality of strategic communication is regarded as a crucial factor in achieving competitive advantage

and pursuing a strategy of differentiation from competitors on the market (Seo *et al.*, 2021). Other indications to look at the specificity of CEO messages can also be found in the literature (Bournois, Point, 2006; Kiattikulwattana, 2019; Kohut, Segars, 1992). It is worth emphasising that the attention of researchers frequently focuses on aspects of corporate legitimacy using messages formulated by key individuals in enterprises when reporting results (Edgar *et al.*, 2018). The symbolic management for the purposes of the communication should enable managers to build the legitimacy of their activities effectively. Although the authors focus on theoretical considerations, the presented framework proved to have empirical importance (Janiszewski, Dziubińska, 2024).

The presented research results are part of the literature on corporate legitimacy strategies concentrated on legitimacy strategies for communicating activities. The authors of this paper attempt to establish what the conditions need to be met for statements being prepared by enterprises to be the source of symbolic values that next could actually impact activities performed by them. The first section of the paper includes critical literature review focused on a discussion of issues relating to the ways of presenting symbolic management in the literature, and, above all, to diverse types of symbols and possibilities of generating diverse types of symbolic value resulting from it. The second section explains an approach applied to the formulation of the problem in the field of communicating and legitimising corporate activity focusing at the same time on communication tools, especially issues related to CEO letters. The third section elaborates on legitimacy strategies and issues relating to communicating. Next conclusions are presented with regard to how conditions for symbolic values impacting activities performed by companies should be described.

2. Symbols and symbolic management as theoretical concepts

In this section the set of prominent body of literature in the field of symbols and symbolic management is analysed which allow for the discussion of sources of legitimate work activities. We understand symbols as textual signs by which the content they refer is signified so that labels and categories created by symbols have meaning in social interactions while possibly combining sufficiently supported statements with those that may lack sufficient support (Janiszewski, Dziubińska, 2024, p. 163). Symbolic management can be conceptualised as a “theory of how organisational representatives seek to influence the perceptions of key stakeholders (and of each other)” (King, 2022, p. 6; Westphal, Park, 2020). In this sense, it makes it possible to complement the explanation provided by the agency theory. Here, the assumption is made that just like between symbol and substance, there is a significant split between appearance and reality. Therefore, symbolic management can be viewed through the prism of “a set of tools, practices and processes that represents attempts to convey the

impression that governance is done as prescribed while still preserving the autonomy and power of those at the helm of the organization” (King, 2022, p. 6). Edgar et al. (2018), noting that impression management has its origins in the social psychology literature, describe the use of these concepts in the research on corporate reporting, especially in cases of unfavourable financial performance, environmental disasters, and major reorganisations (Edgar et al., 2018, p. 1566; Merkl-Davies, Brennan, 2007). Communication strategies applied then are characterised by a discretionary nature of the narratives created in the financial, social, and environmental areas included in annual reports (Edgar et al., 2018; Hooghiemstra, 2000), and managers use them to impact on stakeholder perceptions (Deegan, 2002; Edgar et al., 2018).

Elsbach emphasises that impression management theories (e.g. Goffman, 1973), next to institutional theories (e.g. DiMaggio, Powell, 1983) are the main theoretical perspectives describing organisational legitimacy management (King, 2022). Apart from the role of Goffman’s theory of impression management in the development of symbolic management, King emphasises the significance of research on the issues of influence and persuasion conducted by psychologists such as Cialdini. Thus, symbolic management can also be perceived in terms of its significance for embedding shared objectives (Van Knippenberg, 2000) and linking groups to group values (Thompson, Bunderson, 2003). It is worth emphasising that the early interest of theoreticians representing the impression management trend (e.g. Leary, Kowalski, 1990) focused on how people manage their personal legitimacy. Later, it was noted that the same tactic can be used by organisational spokespersons to manage organisational legitimacy (Elsbach, 1994, e.g. Elsbach, Sutton, 1992). Aiming to overcome the ambiguities accrued over the years of research conducted on symbols in different disciplines relating to, *inter alia*, the meaning of symbols and their relevance to an organisation, Schnackenberg et al. (2019) presented a strategic framework for symbolic management. Mentioned authors define symbolic management through the prism of symbolic creation, symbolic elaboration, and symbolic association between the organisation and stakeholders symbols/or symbolic association between stakeholders and the organisational symbols. In contrast, they present impression management as describing how symbols can be used to influence socially and culturally determined audience’s attitudes and beliefs using verbal descriptions and explanations in which symbols are embedded (Schnackenberg et al., 2019). In the literature, symbols are described as bringing additional meaning that is not explicitly presented and therefore, for example, information can be seen as an instrumental resource and also as a symbol of intelligent and competent behaviour. The use of information reduced to a symbolic tool involves signalling rationality, intelligence, and knowledge (Feldman, March, 1981; Sandberg, Alvesson, 2021). Not only can organisational symbolism structure perceptions of organisational activities, but it can also help an organisation to quickly undertake legitimate work activities (Daft, 1983 as cited in: Elsbach, 1994, p. 60).

Another significant issue raised in the literature is how types of particular symbols can be distinguished and how to contribute to value creation for the organisation through their proper use. Zott and Huy understand symbolic activities as the ones “in which the actor displays or tries to draw other people’s attention to the meaning of an object or action that goes beyond the object’s or action’s intrinsic content or functional use” (Zott, Huy, 2007, p. 70). In their opinion those activities can significantly improve potential access to the resources. Schnackenberg et al. (2019) place additional emphasis on the benefits for the organisation that can result from symbolic management such as higher performance, risk avoidance, implementation of organisational and social changes. To provide a comprehensive view of symbolic values generated by symbols, it is proposed to distinguish various types of symbols that can be used by organisations. Among them are: ideological symbols (with assigned extremely significant meanings that are inspiring for stakeholders, deserve respect and resonate among them, and that can also indicate the right thing to do based on beliefs that people find attractive and admired) (Schnackenberg et al., 2019, pp. 381-384), comparative symbols (with meanings given on the basis of better/worse, superior/subordinate resolutions based on criteria that stakeholders find attractive; they may also indicate above average credibility and goodwill) (Elsbach, 1994; Schnackenberg et al., 2019, pp. 381-384) or isomorphic symbols (presenting themselves as understandable and somewhat preconceived without the need for further verification; they convey judgements on the right/wrong, common/uncommon issues based on the prevailing cultural expectations) (Schnackenberg et al., 2019, pp. 381-385). The significant point here is that symbols can convey complex sets of meanings which indicate many forms of ideological, comparative and isomorphic value. The examples include courage, teamwork, pursuing something seemingly unattainable (ideological symbols), technical competences needed to undertake unique ventures (comparative symbols), and social, cultural and political support for particular undertakings (isomorphic symbols) (Logsdon, 1989; Romzek, Dubnick, 1987; Schnackenberg et al., 2019). For the purposes of this paper, it is proposed that symbolic value can be presented as a feature of a message generated by the symbols embedded in it. This value decides upon its impact on other messages and action taken by organisations, as a result of which organisations can generate value for themselves through changes in messages and activities (i.e. changes in legitimacy context). Then it appears to be significant to capture when symbolic values, generated by symbols embedded in messages released for the legitimacy purposes, by impacting on the legitimate context, can constitute a value-creating factor for the organisation.

Attention may be drawn to a dual role of messages conveyed by key managers. On the one hand, they can be regarded as tools that make it possible to generate value for the organisation by embedding symbols in them (Schnackenberg et al., 2019). At the same time, such messages constitute, while more or less accurately reflecting reality, a record of aspirations related to organisational legitimacy management (i.e., gaining, maintaining, and repairing corporate legitimacy), or creating their status and reputation (Bitektine, 2011; Edgar et al., 2018;

Suchman, 1995). By learning and refining legitimate work activities in messages through creating narratives that give meaning to a particular experience (following the Wittgensteinian model in which words cannot carry explicit meaning when separated from their situational use) and by rationally analysing a given experience, organisations generate knowledge (Boland, Tenkasi, 1995; Bruner, 1990). The process encompasses perspective making which indicates how to perceive, comprehend, and evaluate the organisation, but it should also improve the communities of knowing to open to perspective taking (Boland, Tenkasi, 1995). Moreover, the role of sensemaking of collectively understood experiences (Schnackenberg et al., 2019) clarifies the objectives by bringing the causes to the attention of the organisation (Lindenberg, Foss, 2011), whereas considered in the linguistic dimension, makes it possible to distinguish different dominating ways of explaining activities by the organisation (Ashforth, Gibbs, 1990; Basu, Palazzo, 2008). For organisations, social judgements involving stakeholders' opinions or decisions relating to social properties of organisations are significant (Bitektine, 2011; Schnackenberg et al., 2019). In addition to legitimacy, these properties may also include status and reputation, while the constructs of reputation and status can be regarded as complementary to legitimacy, since some of the dimensions responsible for their formation are the same and their operationalisations can be correlated (Bitektine, 2011). It is assumed in this paper that the appearance of identifiable perspective making and sensemaking at the message level should indicate a correlation with legitimate work activities reflecting a more exploratory or exploitative focus on organisational learning (March, 1991). The issues relating to the proper framing of legitimisation of corporate activities are discussed in greater detail in one of the next sections. Adopting a proper point of view in this area helps to frame the appropriate use of symbols for impacting the legitimacy context at both message and activity levels.

3. Methodology and the enterprises' statements as tool for communicating and legitimising corporate activity

As the approach that inspired authors to formulate research problem in the current paper, was the one presented by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) who argued that theories could be more influential when the researchers were to focus more on assumptions underlying existing literature than on how gaps in existing theories can be constructed. The issue is that when attempting to challenge assumptions the authors could make use of the typology of assumptions open for problematization that includes in-house assumptions, root metaphor assumptions, paradigm assumptions, ideology assumptions and field assumptions. Deriving from Suchman's notion that for the correct understanding of legitimacy management it is crucial to consider not only the influence of the messages on the perception of the audience, but also organisational changes, the main proposition is built in the current text. It is proposed that based on the

possibility of the creation of symbolic values by symbols embedded in messages conveyed by managers, who attempt to manage the legitimacy of their enterprises, the assumptions present in impression management body of literature related to the impact of its technique mainly on the perception of the readers, especially shareholders, can be challenged as the in-house assumption existing within a particular school of thought (Alvesson, Sandberg, 2011, p. 254). While noticing that results achieved by the organization can be a means of communication used by this organization, the message conveyed in the form of results is also expected to demonstrate a situation of an enterprise e.g. the increase in uncertainty. In terms of conducted analyses, enterprise' statements should be considered as an important source of data. They may constitute an important element of the presented concept in terms of level of measurement, which refers to "the unit to which the data are directly attached" (Rousseau, 1985, p. 4).

However, while considering the significance of an enterprise' statement as a communication tool, a few issues should be highlighted. As Bournois and Point (2006) note, together with the development of the Internet, the significance of CEO letters as an object of academic analysis has increased. In general, the messages conveyed by the Board play a vital role in PR activities, constitute announcements of remarkable events, justify activities and decisions and are initiatives supporting legitimacy building. Moreover, they define the vision that business leaders want to share with the audiences or impose on those audiences. In addition, an enterprise' statement can also be perceived as means of understanding how an enterprise operates and what perceptions it has of itself or what perceptions it wants to present to others. Bournois and Point's (Bournois, Point, 2006) research also indicated that distinctive styles can be used in an enterprise statement to comment on enterprise performance, and the performance itself can be recontextualised (there may be, for instance, a tendency to adopt an overly positive approach). Furthermore, in an analysis of the influence of financial performance on the issues addressed (i.e., environment, growth, operating philosophy, markets and products, unfavourable financial situation, favourable financial situation) by the CEOs of the 25 best performing Fortune 500 companies, the ability to classify the best and worst performing companies (using return on equity - ROE - to evaluate financial situation) on the basis of the issues addressed in enterprise statement was demonstrated (Kohut, Segars, 1992).

It is important to note that certain types of information contained in messages conveyed by the Board can be regarded as essential factors supporting the ability to foresee financial performance (Che et al., 2020), or as influencing the ability of enterprises to achieve specific financial performance, and thus their competitive advantage (Kiattikulwattana, 2019). Assuming that an enterprise' statement contains information on CSR results that are significant to stakeholders taking decisions about investing in corporations, Che et al. (2020) posed a question how sentimental attributes present in stakeholder letters could allow for anticipating the financial performance of corporations. Based on the appraisal theory and distinguishing 11 categories of attributes, they assumed that enterprises with good performance use a more positive, optimistic tone, whereas enterprises with unfavourable financial performance use

a more active language, since they have to undertake positive activities to improve their image and attract investors. They found that, among all categories of attributes, the most prevalent were positive attitude influence, positive appraisal, attitude appreciation and positive gradation, and that enterprises with poor financial performance used more active language to describe and evaluate their CSR activities. They also established, inter alia, that there is linear performance between sentiment performance and economic performance (Che et al., 2020). In addition, markets may react to the content of stakeholder letters in a negative way. For instance, the more business content is disclosed, the lower untypical feedback may be and a negative correlation with future company performance is noted (Kiattikulwattana, 2019). Depending on the financial performance of enterprises, the response to various issues covered in letters to stakeholders, or the tone in which they have been written, may differ (Kiattikulwattana, 2019). It can be demonstrated that additional insight can be brought to the analysis of the content of corporate reports by viewing their content from the perspective of various types of symbols, which may not necessarily be synonymous with the pursuit of so-called impression management. When being intertwined with social learning processes, these symbols may have not only an informative role but the agentic one as well.

4. Results and discussion

Researchers dealing with corporate legitimacy can present it in a theoretical way in accordance with three perspectives, i.e., as *a thing* (then it is viewed through the prism of a company's property, resource, or capability), but also as *an interactive process* or *a form of socio-cognitive perception or evaluation*. Depending on the adopted perspective actors engaged in constructing legitimacy can respectively *possess legitimacy*, *be change agents*, and *get involved mainly in judgement making*. As it can be seen from one perspective, legitimacy can be perceived as a result of a degree of alignment or congruence between material manifestation of legitimacy within the organisation (e.g. products, structures, routines) and normative expectations of the external environment. On the other hand, apart from the appearance of such congruence, the way of achieving it is also significant. This emphasises the role of the subjective agency in explaining how legitimacy is socially constructed. From the perspective of the process, the role of a change agent, who attempts to implement social change regarding how the object of legitimacy (organisation) is appraised by the audience, is articulated to the greatest extent possible. The CEO drafting a message to stakeholders can be perceived through the prism of influencing the process of achieving compliance by participating in decision-making processes with regard to ventures undertaken, as well as by deciding how information about decisions taken is communicated to the stakeholders appraising the organisation (Suddaby et al., 2017). Two perspectives are significant in the context of deliberations

presented. Firstly, they are the strategies used by organisations to achieve fitness with the environment (according to the view of legitimacy as property) (Suddaby et al., 2017). Secondly, they are the processes through which legitimacy of organisational activities can take place (in accordance with legitimacy viewed as a process) (Suddaby et al., 2017).

It can be particularly highlighted that legitimacy can be perceived as a process of collective meaning-making that can occur through language (e.g. Searle, 1969), communication (Suddaby, 2010) and text translation (Czarniawska, Joerges, 1996; Suddaby et al., 2017). It should be emphasised here that since legitimacy is a process in which many actors participate and which takes place on many levels, gaining legitimacy is not a result of an individual actor's efforts (Suddaby et al., 2017). An individual actor who can use language to create meaning with a different level of awareness and agency is not able to control the process of interpretation (Maguire, Hardy, 2009; Suddaby et al., 2017). As it has been noted before, symbolic management is sometimes linked to communication aimed at generating a positive impression among the audiences. The behavioural approach is adopted as the opposite. It indicates that corporate activities are changed to correspond more closely to what the message conveys about them (Kim et al., 2007). It appears to be significant to know to what extent the process of establishing that takes place through language in CEO messages serves the purpose of emphasising and refining various aspects of the organisation's operation that are important for the organisation itself and its audiences (substantive dimension of legitimate work activities, i.e., at the process level), and to what extent the information function of the message subsides under the influence of pursuit of general presentation of the organisation in a positive light (symbolic dimension of legitimate work activities, i.e., at the message level).

Taking into account what has been stated above, it is suggested that when considering the role of symbols embedded in messages about legitimate work activities (undertaken in connection with the implementation of different legitimacy strategies used for the purposes of shaping legitimacy context in real dimension), one should focus not only on embedded symbols as tools for impression making, but ask about their role from the point of view of generating symbolic values as a consequence of their embedding in messages about legitimate work activities and impact on the legitimacy context created by messages about legitimate work activities actually undertaken. The framework for the analysis is presented graphically in Figure 1.

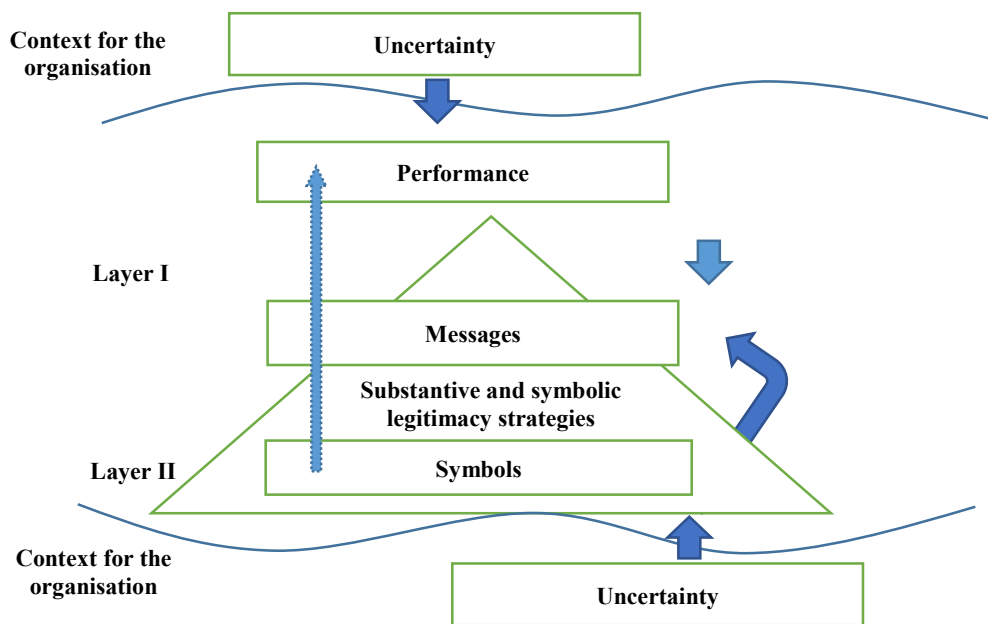


Figure 1. Framework for the analysis concerning the field of the communication based on symbols.

Source: Own work.

The elements in Figure 1 require further discussion. In the case of many enterprises, the conditions of uncertainty, like e.g. those related to COVID-19 pandemic, translated into uncertainty about the possibility of continuing business activity in the future and made predicting possible financial results extremely hindered. The context of the pandemic and changes in financial performance related to its outbreak can be regarded as the main factor that is regarded as potentially important from the point of view of legitimacy strategies for communicating corporate activities present in enterprises' statements (including diverse types of symbols embedded in messages about legitimate work activities <resulting from the implementation of the legitimacy strategy>). Hence, the relevance of the arrows pointing from context to results (as shown in layer one, i.e., directly exposed by the company) and from results to messages (also contained in layer one) should not raise doubts. High uncertainty, for instance, can negatively affect results and encourage the formulation of messages that emphasise its significance. However, the figure still points out that the formulated messages can be analysed in terms of the symbols they contain (included in layer two, i.e., the hidden layer), regardless of whether symbolic or substantive legitimisation strategies are involved. Simultaneously, an arrow pointing from the message to the results is also proposed as one that encourages people to analyse the role and the possibility of using symbols in the formulated messages.

As it was signaled legitimacy strategies can be exercised as both symbolic and substantive strategies. In the context of symbolic legitimacy strategies, it should be noted that through impression management organisations can change the stakeholder perception (Deegan, 2002; Edgar et al., 2018). In their research, Edgar et al. (2018) note that the benefits brought by public-private partnership projects make it more advantageous for companies to do so than to undertake substantive activities which could basically only come down to the termination of

profitable projects due to the controversy surrounding them. Edgar et al. (2018) emphasise that while impression management in annual reports influences the perception of public policy, it is one of many influences which may prove useful since, *inter alia*, it reflects what managers may think about the factors influencing public policy (Edgar, 2018). Edgar et al. (2018) note that annual reports, in particular narratives that are not audited, provide an opportunity to use symbolic management through discussion about the positive features of these projects. It should be noted at this point that Suchman (1995) notices that legitimacy management, as majority of cultural processes, is based on, to a considerable extent, communication which requires knowledge of a diversified arsenal of techniques and awareness of the response that a particular situation deserves. As it has already been mentioned in this paper, for legitimacy management, in addition to a convincing organisational communication, a specific organisational change with its later reflection in the right communication is essential (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, it is crucial to note that substantive legitimacy strategies (whose meaning is considered in terms of organisational changes, *i.e.*, at the process level), in addition to symbolic strategies (whose meaning is considered through the influence on the perception of the audience, *i.e.*, at the message level) are also significant for legitimacy management.

It is worth adding that Hahn and Lülfs (2014) identified the techniques for communicating legitimacy that may, by definition, pursue a more symbolic practice (which involves an attempt to influence the perception of specific processes by audiences) or emphasise the significance of the substantive approach (which involves actual change in objectives, structures, actions, or activities). The substantive approach defined as objective may be linked to, for example, the use of a communication technique that assumes presentation of facts through the description that does not contain references to value (Hahn, Lülfs, 2014). An example of use of a communication technique related to the symbolic approach can be, for example, the pursuit of linking negative aspects of the organisation's operation with authoritative persons and legitimate practices. Then they perform a role of "legitimacy clues" and may draw the audience away from an active response to legitimising the activity of such an organisation (Hahn, Lülfs, 2014, p. 413). Decoupling of words from activities, when one would generally expect the messages to link words with the actual behaviour, constitutes a threat related to the use of communication techniques assigned to the symbolic approach (as seen by Hahn, Lülfs, 2014). Such manipulation may also threaten corporate legitimacy. In the case of substantive approaches linking the communicative discourse with actual behaviour such ambiguity does not arise. In other words, some of the techniques of communicating legitimacy instead of acting to profoundly change corporate processes, their practices, objectives, and approaches, are aimed at changing stakeholder perceptions and therefore do not guarantee that the company is held responsible for its negative influence (Hahn, Lülfs, 2014). Substantive strategies are said to be associated with the use of specific communication techniques (Hahn, Lülfs, 2014)¹. Nevertheless, the question can be asked whether the use of symbols (defined as above, *i.e.*, ideological, comparative, and isomorphic) in messages aimed at legitimising the

company's activities can be used to reinforce intentionally the impact of a substantive strategies as well as can influence actually conducted legitimate work activities when being applied as a part of symbolic strategy for communicating legitimate work activities. The basic characteristics of legitimacy strategies are included in the Table 1.

Table 1.
Legitimacy strategies

| Strategy | Key characteristics | Functions | Danger signals |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Symbolic legitimacy strategies | symbols embedded as triggers of the perception of the audience | general presentation of the organisation in the positive light | identified by stakeholders as a tool for "pulling the wool over the eyes" |
| Substantive legitimacy strategies | symbols embedded to reinforce impact on material processes | refine various aspects of the organisation's operation | too little impact on organizational changes |

Source: Own work.

When referring to the findings of Yan et al. (2019), it should be noted that the presence of impression management in communication in the letters to stakeholders, although sometimes presented in theory as manipulative, in addition to the purposes of self-presentation, can also serve the purposes of information sharing. It is worth mentioning that, in corporate environmental reporting, Chelli et al. (2019) point at substantive disclosures (substantive linguistic strategy) that go beyond the so-called greenwashing and are related to specific activities, i.e., substantive manner of functioning, for instance, environmental activities undertaken (reflected in messages describing successes in sustainability efforts), or activities aimed at educating stakeholders and staff (reflected in messages emphasising development of environmental trainings and education among selected employees and stakeholders) (Thompson, 2007 and Eagleton, 2007 as cited in: Chelli et al., 2019).

From the point of view adopted in the paper it is significant that for legitimacy management the approaches applied require reference to substantive as well as symbolic dimensions. Moreover, the undertaken activities described in enterprises' reports should correspond as closely as possible to what is undertaken by a given enterprise. Simultaneously, the use of specific messages about legitimate work activities is not to be limited to the shaping of impressions, however, by opening the field to various types of symbols (potentially differentiated due to different factors, i.e., uncertainty closely related to changes in financial performance) embedded for the purposes of argumentation in messages may require launching of all three processes discussed earlier, that is perspective making, sensemaking and social judgements.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of the conducted analysis was to establish what the conditions need to be met for statements being prepared by enterprises to be the source of symbolic values that next could actually impact activities performed by them. The results of the literature studies open up a new cognitive perspective for managers responsible for preparing financial statements. This perspective can be particularly useful in situations of high uncertainty when it is difficult or even impossible to base interpretation on facts. The intentional generation of symbolic values through the symbols embedded in messages can serve as a valuable tool for supporting the achievement of legitimacy purposes.

The question that can be posed at this point is whether in fact each time ideological, isomorphic, or comparative symbols appear in the messages used by organisations, there is a decoupling between the information layer of the message and the actual behaviour. Alternatively, symbols appearing in the messages, by creating specific values, may be perceived as a tool that reinforces the strength of the messages as triggers of legitimate work activities, especially in those circumstances where they are justified by the external environment in which enterprises operate. What emerges as particularly significant pertains to the focus of the statements contained in the reports, which as a rule may, for instance, place more or less emphasis on describing past experiences or outline a vision of the future. What also matters is how these efforts are described, e.g. by the use of rather concisely outlined suppositions or comments emphasising the unusual nature of the situation. It is postulated that, depending on the approach adopted by the CEO, reports being a significant message for external stakeholders on the one hand can affect internal stakeholders differently. The article emphasises the fact that the description of the indicated approach is possible with the use of the concept of symbols and their different types, i.e., ideological, comparative, and isomorphic. As an example, depending on their selection, the strength of the impact of the messages contained in the reports can be aimed, for instance, at explaining the scale of the difficulty of current changes by referring them (with varying levels of detail and accompanying greater higher or lower suggestiveness of the language used) to the past, or at explaining the scope of plans for the future possibly presented as, for instance, a challenge to the organisation, but also (additionally) as a commitment to the environment. Outlined in this manner, the context for building the legitimacy of the company's statements will each time adopt a set of unique features. Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether among them it is possible to identify such features, whose regularity of co-occurrence can be observed among different authors, and companies and thus adopt as recommendations depending on the objectives assumed by the authors of the message.

In the light of the arguments presented, it seems reasonable to believe that the use of symbols may change communication tools utilized by senior corporate executives depending on the conditions of the environment (e.g. outbreak of the pandemic). More generally, it seems

that there are noteworthy interactions between the used messages about legitimate work activities and diverse types of symbols embedded in them. Symbolic values shape the legitimacy context and thus constitute a value for the organization (Janiszewski, Dziubińska, 2024). It is also worth noting that the research trend on symbolic management is relatively new, so its theoretical framework requires critical attention. Certainly, a factor influencing the effectiveness of actions taken within symbolic management is the cultural context, which significantly conditions the selection and interpretation of the symbols used (Scott, 2014). The issue outlined requires further research, whereas the considerations presented, by pointing out the key building blocks, shed new light on the possible role and scope of the use of symbols in messages created by companies.

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Footnotes

¹ The technique of detailed corrective action, which, as viewed by Hahn and Lülfs (2014), is the only one associated with the indication of ideas supported by measures of success, may be relevant to this. Among the techniques of communicating legitimate work activities, also the technique of abstraction (attributing company problems to the whole industry), and, to a greater extent, the technique of indicating facts (without hints as to the relevance of the scale of their occurrence) show greater legitimising potential attributed to substantive approaches (Hahn, Lülfs, 2014; Higgins, Walker, 2012).